15¢

EXCITING WESTERN

MAR.

THE Law OF AVERAGES

A Tombstone & Speedy Novel

By W. C. TUTTLE

RANGERS RIDE ALONE

A Navajo Raine Novelet *By* JACKSON COLE

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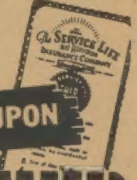

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EXCITING WESTERN

VOL. 13, No. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION MARCH, 1947

THE LAW OF AVERAGES

By W. C. TUTTLE

What with handling Mortimer, wayward heir to the Aldrich millions, and busting the tough rustlers of Little Apache Valley, Tombstone and Speedy, those rollicking range sleuths, are kept right busy! A roaring action novel! 13

SHOTGUN GADGET GAMBLE.....Ben Frank 37
Rancher Andy Kretlow combats a vengeful sidewinder.

RANGERS RIDE ALONE (Novelet).....Jackson Cole 44
Navajo Tom Raine, the Arizona Ranger, solves a triple crime—and metes out gun justice to evil renegades!

THE COWBOY HAD A WORD FOR IT!.....Chuck Stanley 62
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GOLD IN THEM HILLS.....Reeve Walker 66
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THE TRIGGER FINGER WRITES.....Allan K. Echols 74
The citizens of High Mesa needed Hack Lawton's help!

SHOWDOWN RIDES THE RIVER (Novelet).Walker A. Tompkins 82
They called Clint Gregg "just a kid" but he was one plumb salty hombre when facing a crooked gun crew!

TROUBLE COOKIN' COOKIE.....Clark Gray 96
Peg-leg Gosse plays the role of a greedy land-hog!

TRAIL BLAZERS.....Captain Ranger 6
A meaty department dedicated to the great outdoors.

EXCITING WESTERN published every other month and copyright 1946 by Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscriptions (12 issues), $1.80; single copies, $.15. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Entered as second class matter March 20, 1945, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

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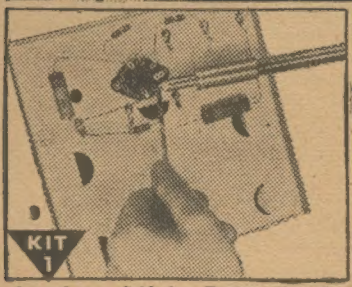

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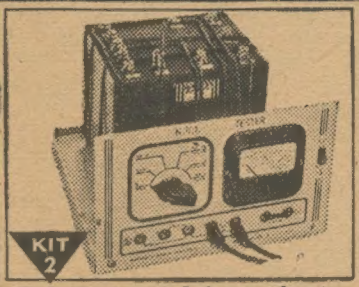
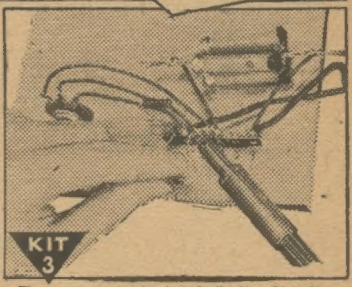


Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



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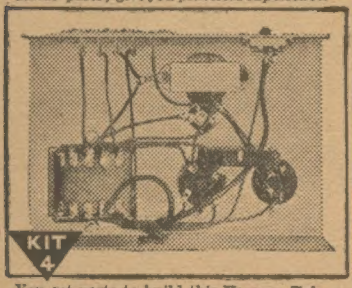

You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.

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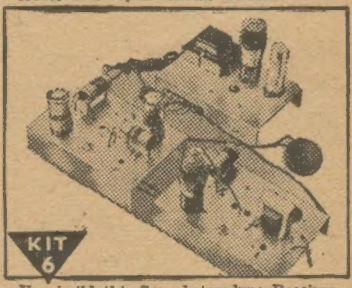

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A Department for Readers Conducted by CAPTAIN RANGER

GOLD mining has always appealed to red-blooded adventurous hombres. The dream of hitting the yellow metal jackpot has played on many a man's imagination, luring him out to the desert wilderness, or into the depths of little known mountain ranges.

And sometimes the dream, that shower of virgin gold at the end of the prospector's rainbow, has come true. Not always. Not even most of the time. But often enough to fleck the history of gold mining in our own West with almost unbelievable stories of fabulous strikes—made for the most part by the pick and shovel prospector.

Gold-Hunting is Glamorous

Such bonanza discoveries, though they are the exception rather than the rule, have nevertheless been sufficiently frequent to color the whole business of gold hunting with a glamor that is well-nigh irresistible to the born prospector. He'll tromp the back country, do arduous labor and put up with hardships you couldn't pay him enough money to accept—all on that one chance in a hatful that he'll someday make the big strike that is his goal.

The wonder is not that he may never find that single vein of rich ore-bearing rock in years of checking hillsides, gulches, canyons, desert washes, and every attainable outcrop on snow-capped mountain peaks. The miracle is that so often he does.

A Needle in a Haystack

A vein of rock, or a hidden placer pay streak in some lonely creek bed is a mighty small thing when you consider the vast surface geography the prospector covers in his search. It is like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Yet gold is where you find it. And it has been found in all sorts of places in million dollar quantities, right within the continental limits of our own richly mineralized Western States.

The bonanza discoveries have been widespread. And they have extended over a long period of time. There was the first and historic stampede of the '49ers to California. Millions of dollars worth of gold, new wealth for the country, came from the early day placer camps in the semi-desert country of Arizona's gold mining areas. More millions started Denver and added Colorado to the bonanza mining list. The same could be said for Montana's Alder Gulch and Idaho's first placer camps. For New Mexico and Oregon around Grant's Pass. Nevada too has had its share of bonanza gold producers. And there have been many others.

The catalogue of past successes would fill pages, and serve no particular purpose here and now.

The Search Goes On

The point is with all this past production the search for more gold deposits is still going on today. So is the mining of gold from established properties. And both—prospecting and mining alike—are being carried on right now with more intensity than a lot of you folks, not in the mining districts, are prone to realize.

There's been a revitalized postwar hunt for yellow metal. Not just in the West either. The present interest in gold mining is world wide.

Lately news has been filtering out of bonanza rich gold discoveries made recently in South Africa. And the reports say the finds have been followed by a regular old-fashioned gold stampede to the new diggings.

Canada has been experiencing a postwar gold boom, with much of the current mining activity and prospecting being centered around the comparatively new mining town

(Continued on page 8)

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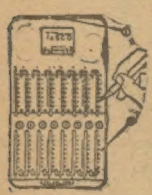

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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 6)

of Yellowknife away out in a former wilderness area of the far north country. Russia is busy mining gold in its own rich, but completely nationalized gold territories.

We may bury our gold at Fort Knox instead of using it as we used to do for general monetary circulation. But we still want as much of the yellow metal as we can get. And so does every other country in the world.

Quite aside from the glamor aspect of gold mining, gold has a tremendous, vital importance in the world's overall economic structure. No theorist has yet been able to think up a more practical medium of world monetary exchange, or a better basis for sound international credit than—gold. And they've been trying to, for one reason or another, ever since money was first invented thousands of years ago when the world was in swaddling clothes.

Deep Water!

This is kinda gettin' into deep water. But friends, what I want to stress is simple as ABC. Gold mining is not dead, nor is it likely to be in the foreseeable future. It hasn't gone with the buffalo, the stagecoach, the old Texas longhorn and other relics of the West's pioneer past. It is still with us.

And right now interest in gold mining and gold prospecting is swinging back to renewed intensity after the necessary slowdown which was caused by the exigencies of the late war.

Today's Opportunities

Is there gold mining opportunity left in the West today? Personally I believe there is. Plenty of it. But don't take my word alone, if you don't want to.

Just let me run through a few headlines in the latest issue I have at hand of an excellent gold mining trade journal published out in San Francisco, California, that is devoted to straight, objective reporting of doings in the gold country.

Oro Osa Group
Open Good Ore
At Auburn Mine

The story on that one reports that a 9 ft. vein of ore assaying from $4.55 to $16.80 in gold has been located at the Oro Osa gold-copper mine near Auburn in Placer county, California.

Here's another:

Raring Reopens
Nevada Equity
Gold Property

That one deals with a new company start-

(Continued on page 10)

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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 8)

ing work on a group of gold claims near Austin, Nevada.

There are many more. For instance:

Garfield Mine
In Idaho Will
Start Shipping

Or:

Colorado Gold
Mine Reopened
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And this one:

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It's No On the Fence Job

There's another thing about prospecting. It is no on the fence job. Either you'll get fascinated by it after your first try. Or having given it a twirl and not caring for it, you'll conclude it's the dumbest way for a man to spend his time you ever heard of. You'll come back vowing that old gag about the prospector is no joke, it's true. You know the one. The saying that you don't have to be crazy to be a prospector, but it helps.

In the latter case come on home and forget prospecting. It's not for you. Perhaps the loneliness of a wilderness mountain cabin got you down. Or silent, star-studded desert nights are the kind that run you nuts. And possibly you couldn't take the disappoint-

(Continued on page 109)

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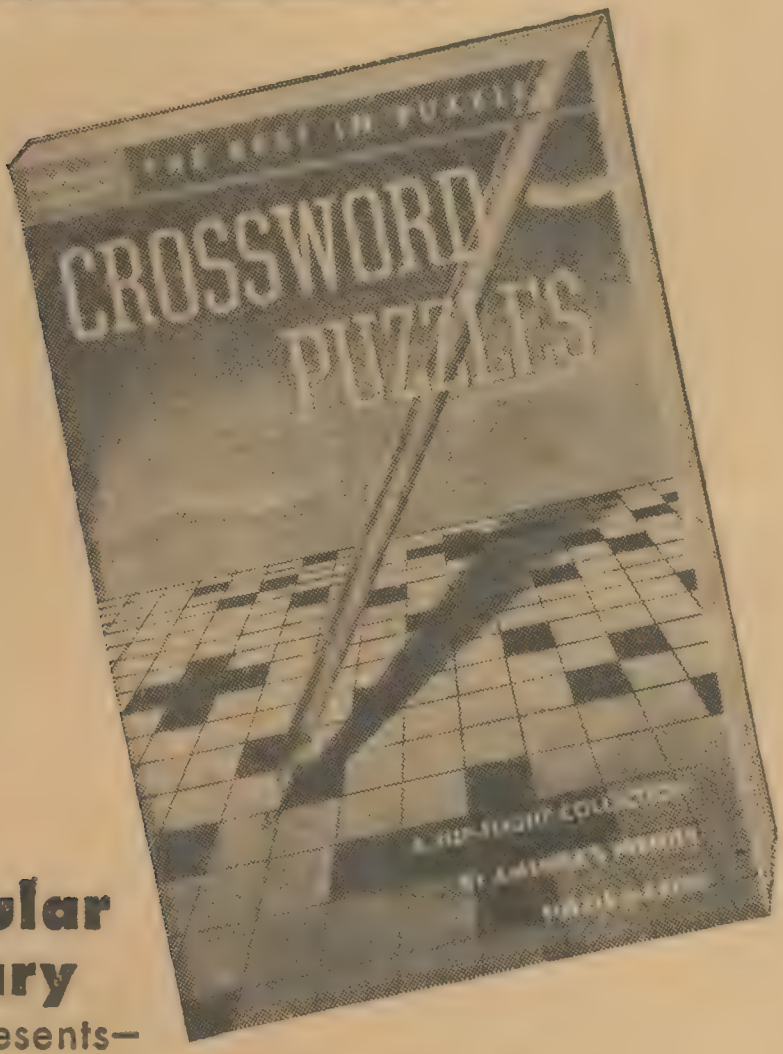

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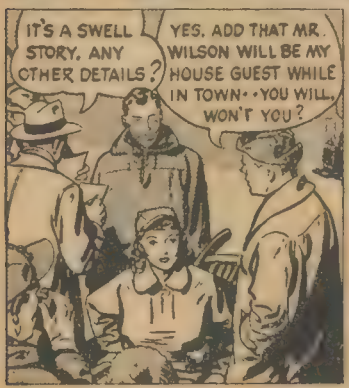

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I CERTAINLY CAN STAND IT AFTER 14 HOURS ON THE TRAIL

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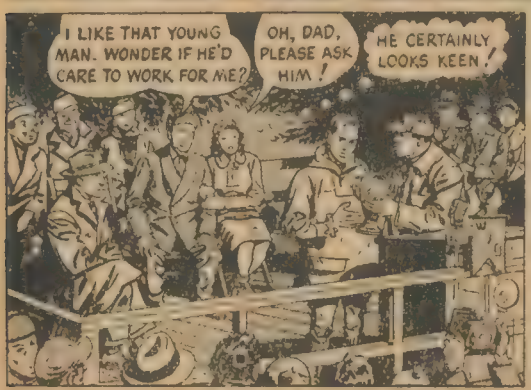

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THIN
Gillette
10

Speedy jumped a foot off his chair when Tombstone drew his .45 and fired

THE LAW OF AVERAGES

By W. C. TUTTLE

What with handling Mortimer, wayward heir to the Aldrich millions, and busting the tough rustlers of Little Apache Valley, the rollicking range sleuths are kept right busy!

CHAPTER I

Bad News

SLOWLY Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith climbed off the caboose of a long cattle train, and came down to the depot, limping a little in their high-heel boots, and carrying their war-bags. They were back to the headquarters of the Cattlemen's Association, and none too happy about it.

Tombstone Jones was a human string-bean, at least seven feet tall in his boots and sombrero. He had a long, lean face, sad eyes and unruly hair. He had to lean over to talk with Speedy Smith, who was several inches under six feet, and as thin as Tombstone.

Speedy was slightly bow-legged, with

A Complete Tombstone and Speedy Novel

round, inquiring eyes and a very discouraged-looking mustache. In fact, it was only a lip-blur. Tombstone had never enjoyed the advantages of schooling, but the tales he could tell never came out of books.

As they limped up to the depot a man almost bumped into them at a corner of the depot. He stopped short.

"Are you Tombstone Jones?" he asked.

"Well," replied Tombstone dryly, "there has been reports to that effect."

"I've seen you at Keaton's office," said the man. "I just came from there and he gave me a telegram to you—to Turquoise City, I believe. No use sending it now."

TOMBSTONE JONES

He produced the penciled telegram and gave it to Tombstone.

They stopped at the edge of the platform and Speedy read it:

NO REPORT FROM YOU ON LAST TWO CASES. YOU ARE IMPOSSIBLE. COME IN AT ONCE. I NEED MEN I CAN DEPEND ON.

Speedy looked grimly up at his lengthy pardner's face.

"Good!" grunted Tombstone. "I'm glad he appreciates us."

"Appreciates us?" gasped Speedy.

"Shore. He says for us to come in at once 'cause he needs men he can depend on."

"I hope you're right," sighed Speedy. "But it don't read like that to me."

"That's the worst of bein' able to read, Speedy—yuh get things all wrong."

Speedy sighed again and picked up his war-bag.

"Sometimes," he said wearily, "I hope there's a shootin' scrape and yo're the ignorant bystander who gits hit."

"Yuh mean innocent bystander, don't yuh, Speedy?"

"Not in yore case."

THEY limped down to the Cattlemen's Association office, quite some distance from the depot. The door was closed and there was a printed card, which said,

BE BACK IN AN HOUR

"I told yuh the man's a mind-reader, Speedy," Tombstone said.

"How do yuh figure that out?"

"Leaves a card, tellin' us to wait for him—and he don't even know we're in town."

"There are times, Tombstone, when I wonder and wonder how the sheep interests ever overlooked you."

Speedy tried the door and found it unlocked, so they went in. Speedy sat down at Jim Keaton's desk, while Tombstone tossed his war-bag into a corner and sprawled on an old leather couch. It was much cooler in there.

Speedy glanced over the desk-top, and a pile of letters attracted him. An attractive letter-head drew his closer attention, and he drew it out from the pile. It was from New York. Speedy read it quickly.

"Love letter?" Tombstone said.

"Nope—business. Dog-gone, it's funny what folks ask for. Listen t' this'n, Tombstone. It's from New York, from some galoot named E. T. Waite. He says:

" 'Dear Sir:—I am one of the principal owners of the Blue Chip Cattle Company in West Fork, Apache Valley. My close friend, Percy J. Aldrich, of this city, has expressed a desire to have his son Mortimer, come to the Blue Chip ranch, and learn the cattle business, from the ground up, and I have agreed that it might be a wonderful character-building opportunity for the young man, who has innate ability, but little ambition.

"He is twenty-one. I am getting in touch with you in this manner, because Mr. Aldrich hesitates to send his son, who has no knowledge of the country, people or customs, unless we can secure the services of a reliable person to observe and protect this young man, unknown to him, of course. Young Mortimer Aldrich is proud

and independent, but, and I regret to say it, drinks to excess, at times.

"I am writing you at length in this matter, seeking your advice and assistance. Would it be practical for you to send one of your best men to carry out this idea? Mr. Aldrich is willing and able to pay any reasonable fee, and we both anxiously await your reply.' "

"I'll take the job," said Tombstone. "That kinda job is jist what I hanker for."

"Yea-a-ah," said Speedy, "but yo're a week late."

"Did somebody kill him that quick, Speedy?"

"I mean that the letter came a week ago. Jim's prob'ly sent a man. Do you know where West Fork is? And don't lie."

"Under them strained circumstances—no, I don't, Speedy."

Jim Keaton came in. Speedy got out of the desk chair and sat down beside Tombstone. No one said anything. Keaton sat down and looked at the two men. He had not heard from them for weeks. His eyes shifted to the desk-top and he noticed the letter Speedy had been reading.

"We got yore telegram and came right on," said Speedy.

"Telegram?" Keaton was puzzled.

"You said yuh needed men yuh could depend on; so we're here," explained Tombstone soberly.

"I said—oh! But that telegram—"

"A man gave it to us at the depot," said Speedy.

"Oh, I see. I was just going to say that you made good time."

"Happy to be at hand," said Tombstone. "Allus reliable."

"Reliable!" snorted Keaton. "You two? Don't you realize that I've had you on two cases, and you've never given me a report? Is that what you call being reliable?"

"We cleaned up both cases, Jim," said Speedy. "After all—"

"I know you did. I managed to get reports from two sheriffs, but none from you two. Where is the six thousand dollars you two got on that deal in Apache Butte? Gone with the breeze?"

"Jim," replied Tombstone soberly, "they'll tell yuh that if yuh keep puttin' yore money on the Double O, the law of averages will make yuh e-ventually win. It won't—not in fifty-five spins."

"Some day," said Keaton soberly, "when you're both old—you'll look back and wish you had saved your money."

"I'd like to ask yuh a honest question, Jim," said Tombstone. "Did yuh ever see a *old* range detective?"

"Well, I suppose there is—I don't know of one, off-hand, Tombstone."

"They don't last," declared Tombstone. "The law of averages work on 'em," said Speedy.

KEATON made a gesture of impatience.

"I wouldn't worry too much about detectives," he said. "From now on, your life expectancy may increase. In other

SPEEDY SMITH

words, I've got to replace you two. I'm sorry, but you two are unreliable."

"Yuh mean—we're fired?" asked Speedy.

"Yes, I'm afraid that is what I mean, Speedy."

"Aw-w-w-w, Jim," protested Tombstone tearfully. "We've given yuh the best years of our lives. It's just like throwin' naked babies out the winder on a cold night. All we know is detectin'. We'd be terrible—tryin' to do anythin' else."

Keaton smothered a grin. Tombstone appeared on the verge of a breakdown. His hands shook, as he tried to roll a cigarette. Speedy took out a handkerchief and wiped his eyes.

"This partin' is terrible, Jim," he said huskily. "You've been a mother to us."

"Yeah, and he's actin' like a step-

mother," wailed Tombstone.

A man came in and handed several telegrams to Keaton, who put them aside for the moment.

"Read 'em, Jim," said Speedy. "There might be a job for us."

Keaton shook his head.

"I'm sorry—no more jobs, boys. Figure out your expenses, and I'll give you a check."

He reached for the telegrams and began opening them. Tombstone got to his feet and went over to the doorway slowly.

"Goodby, Jimmy, my boy," he said huskily. "It's all right. Yo're doin' the best yuh can, and I'd be the last to chide yuh. You'll allus be very dear to me. At night, when I'm cold and starvin' I'll pray for yuh, Jimmy. When I'm— Sa-a-ay! What's eatin' you?"

Jim Keaton was staring at a telegram, his face just a bit white under his natural tan.

Speedy got up and went over to the desk. Keaton didn't say what was wrong —he merely shoved the telegram over to Speedy, who read it quickly.

It was from West Fork, signed by Dave Holiday, sheriff, and read:

JIM HALEY SHOT LAST NIGHT. SAYS HE WORKS FOR YOU. HE AIN'T DEAD YET BUT THE DOCTOR SAYS HE PROBABLY WILL BE.

"That's kinda bad," said Speedy. "Who's Haley, Jim?"

"A new man," replied Keaton. "Experienced, but his first job for us."

"Hired to take our place?" asked Speedy.

Keaton nodded. "Yes, I suppose so."

"Well," said Tombstone, "I reckon the law of averages caught up with him. It's nice to have met you, Jimmy. C'mon, Speedy."

"Wait a minute!" snapped Keaton. His eyes searched for the letter which Speedy had read. He picked it up and showed it to Speedy.

"You read that letter, didn't yuh, Speedy?" he asked.

"Yeah, I—"

"That's the job Haley was on. To blazes with a tenderfoot kid! You two head for West Fork right away. I want the man who killed Haley. There's too much killing of association men going on."

"We don't dry-nurse that kid?" asked Speedy.

"Use your own judgment. Get out of here! And blast your hides, if you don't report to me, I'll shoot you both on sight. You never have reported, but you might."

"Yeah," nodded Tombstone gravely. "The law of averages might work out, Jim."

CHAPTER II

Defiant Witness

TOMBSTONE and Speedy rode a train to Northridge, where they bought second-hand riding rigs and two horses. It was cheaper and more convenient to sell out, after a job was finished and pick up a new outfit later.

Neither of them had ever been in Little Apache Valley. It was thirty-five miles from Northridge to West Fork, although, on a big loop, the railroad ran within a dozen miles of West Fork, but high in the hills.

Broken Fork was strictly a cow-town, but there seemed to be an overabundance of horses at the hitch-racks for a day in the middle of the week. The bartender at the Silver Bar Saloon explained it.

"We had a killin' here a few nights ago, and the killer is havin' his hearin' over at the court-house."

"Who got killed?" asked Tombstone.

"Feller named Haley. Somebody said he was a snooper for the cattlemen's association."

"Murder?" asked Speedy indifferently.

"That's what they're tryin' to find out, I reckon."

They had their drink and went over to the court-house, where the hearing had just got under way.

The defendant was just a kid, wild-eyed, just a bit on the scrawny side. They had him on the stand and he seemed frightened stiff. The prosecutor, a big, hard-jawed person, looked as though he was about to pounce on the kid, as he said harshly:

"I want the truth out of you—and nothing else."

"Yes, sir," said the kid meekly.

"All right! You were drunk and quarrelsome."

"Y-yes, sir—maybe I was."

"You had trouble that afternoon with the owner of the general store."

One of the horses started kicking the end out of the buckboard, unloading the three men suddenly, much to the delight of Speedy, Tombstone and Windy

"It—it wasn't trouble, sir." A flash of mirth crossed the face of the kid. "He had a crate of eggs, and I asked him if he ever saw a man stand on an egg and not break it. Well," the kid swallowed painfully, "we did argue. Finally I bet him fifty cents that I could stand on that crate of eggs, a foot on each side, and not break one egg. He said I was a fool, but he took the bet—and I paid him the fifty cents."

"How many eggs did you break?"

A tall, lean, long-faced man got up in the crowd.

"I'll answer that, Mr. Peterson," he said. "The blasted vandal busted twelve dozen!"

The prosecutor turned to the defendant.

"Did you bust that whole case of eggs?" he asked.

"I didn't look," replied the kid. "I was up to my boot-tops in eggs, so I suppose his count is right."

The crowd howled, and the lawyer didn't like it.

"What's a busted aig got to do with murder?" somebody yelled.

"I want to establish the fact that this boy is a trouble-maker."

"Lovely dove!" exploded a man. "Yuh don't have to establish that!"

The crowd howled some more.

"All right, young man," said the lawyer severely, "You go ahead and tell your story."

"I suppose I was drunk," said the boy. "But not as drunk as they say I was. I was able to deal cards."

"And you accused a man of stealing a card," said the lawyer.

"He stole it," said the boy defiantly. "I don't give a tinker's dam what anybody says—he stole it. I discarded that king."

A man in the front of the house got up quickly.

"Set down, Tex!" somebody said. "You ain't on trial."

"The kid lies!" snapped the man. "I never stole a card."

"You stole that king," said the kid coldly. "And to cover up the theft you were going to beat my head off. At least, you said you were. If that man hadn't stopped you—"

"Wait a minute!" snapped the lawyer. "This is no place for personal recriminations. We want to establish evidence to hold this man, or turn him loose. Young man, what happened next?"

"It is all rather vague," replied the defendant. "The man who stole the card got up and went away, I believe. In fact, I believe the game broke up. The man asked me to go outside with him, and I remember that he asked me to give him my gun."

"And when he insisted on taking your gun, you shot him with it," said the lawyer.

"I did not!" flared the youngster. "I gave him the gun, and just then somebody bumped into me. I was knocked down, and then I heard two shots."

THE lawyer rubbed his chin; then he fired another comment, a quick one.

"Wait a moment! There was only one shot."

"Just a moment," drawled a voice, and a tall, lean, lantern-jawed man stood up in the audience. He was Windy Wethers, the deputy.

"I ain't said nothin' before," he said, "but I was over by the post office, and I'd almost swear two shots was fired, almost together."

Windy sat down, and up popped Brad Hess, owner of the Double H.

"After the kid and that man went outside, I went to the saloon doorway," said Hess. "I was closer than Windy was—and I only heard one shot."

"Did anyone else hear two shots?" asked the lawyer.

No one replied.

"I was closer than any of them—and I heard two," the young man said.

The lawyer shuffled some papers and turned to the Justice of the Peace, an old, bewhiskered person, who seemed to be enjoying the debate.

"Judge, I believe there is sufficient evidence to hold this man for the next term of court," the lawyer said.

The judge nodded, and in the confusion of clearing the room, Tombstone and Speedy went back to the street. Men were discussing the case.

"Well, the kid ain't got much sense," one of them said. "But his Old Man has got a lot of money, they tell me. He'll prob'ly have the best lawyers on earth down here."

"Who is the kid?" Tombstone asked.

Windy Wethers, the deputy sheriff, was behind Tombstone.

"Mortimer Aldrich," Wethers said.

The deputy went on down the street. Tombstone and Speedy stood in front of the general store and looked things over.

"Well, we won't have to dry-nurse the kid, that's a cinch," Speedy said.

"No," said Tombstone. "Nor hunt for the killer of Haley. This is the biggest cinch job we ever had."

"In yore sublime ignorance," said Speedy quietly, "do you think that kid killed Haley?"

"What does sublime mean?"

"Well, I reckon it means perfect."

"Ain't none of us perfect, Speedy. Allus remember that. Let's go down and talk with that deputy. Maybe we'll learn somethin'."

"All right. But don't tell him what we're here for."

"What'll I do if he asks me?"

"Lie—like you always do, Tombstone."

The tall cowpoke sighed deeply.

"I'm the most misunderstood person on earth," he declared. "I hate to lie and I hate liars."

"That's good practise," said Speedy, "Keep it up, and you'll be in good shape, when he asks yuh."

They found the sheriff, Dave "Happy" Holiday, and Windy Wethers together in the office. Happy was a big, rotund person, with a moon-like face and little, dot-like eyes. He looked with a certain amount of suspicion on these two strange cowpokes. They introduced themselves as Jones and Smith which increased the suspicion.

"Holiday, eh?" Tombstone said. "Yuh don't hear that name often. I wondered if you are a re-late of Old Jim Holiday, who used to range up around Chillycow, Montana. Old Jim was sure a dinger. God-fearin', upright, church-goin' person, who was loved by most everybody. But absent-minded? Terrible. One day he saw the loose end of a rope in the road. Old Jim needed a rope awful bad—so he took it along. Yeah, yo're right—there was a horse on the other end of it. His last words was, as they kicked the barrel out from under his feet, was:

" 'Get me a sheriff.' Well, sir, I reckon that became the slogan of the Holiday family from that on, and I'm awful glad they finally got one."

"I never had a relative in Montana," said the sheriff.

Windy Wethers doubled up with unholy mirth, his eyes filled with tears, but Tombstone and Speedy never cracked a smile.

"Windy, what are you laughin' about?" asked the sheriff.

"Did I say anythin' funny?" asked Tombstone.

"You did not," replied the sheriff. "Windy's crazy."

It required some time for Windy to recover, but he still threatened to have a break-down at any time. The sheriff was disgusted.

"I've got to get somethin' to eat," he said, and walked out.

WINDY drew a deep breath and wiggled his ears.

"I've allus wanted to do that," said Speedy. "It's a art."

"I was born thataway," said Windy.

"You was, huh?" marveled Speedy. "Mostly they're born with four feet. Yo're a wonder. Windy, my name's Speedy, and that'n is named Tombstone."

"That's fiine. The sheriff's name is Happy, but he ain't. Nope. Too important. Thinks he's got a murderer. That fool kid never shot that feller. Shucks, he couldn't hit the side of a wall with that big, ole forty-five."

"Who was the jasper which stole the king out of the discard?" Tombstone asked.

"Him? Oh, that's Tex Evers. He buys for several packers. Stays here most of the time. Too lazy to work. How'd you fellers happen to drop in here?"

"We didn't happen to," said Tombstone soberly. "Yuh see, Windy, we work for the Government."

"Yuh do? Huh! Well, fine. Secret work?"

"Well, yes and no. We operate kinda secret-like, but we don't care who knows what we're doin'."

"Yuh don't, huh? Well, what do yuh do, Tombstone?"

"I wouldn't want yuh to tell folks about it," said Tombstone confidentially, "but me and Speedy represent the law of averages for the state of Arizona."

"Oh, yea-a-ah. Well, that's fine. Huh! How long will yuh be here?"

"Oh, maybe a couple days, maybe longer."

"Sounds interestin'. I'd like to do somethin' interestin'. Yuh know, a feller wastes his time bein' a deputy sheriff. How does a feller go about gettin' a job like yours?"

"Well, you've got to have pull," replied Tombstone. "My father was a big man in Washington."

After they left the office Speedy said:

"Yore father was a big man in Washington, eh?"

"Sure was, Speedy. When he lived up

near Seattle he weighed two hundred and fifty. That's big, ain't it?"

They went to the Lone Star Hotel, a sagging, frame building on the main street, and found the proprietor, a long, slat-like woman, behind the desk, talking to a cowman.

"Well, Miz Green, I'll be a-seein' yuh," the cowman said.

He walked away, and the two cowpokes went up to the desk. The woman looked them over severely.

"Mrs. Green, we'd like a room, if yuh please, ma'am," Tombstone said.

"Yuh do, eh?" she said soberly. "First I want yuh to understand that I run a clean place. No drunks, no fights—and no credit."

Tombstone looked at her in amazement.

"How in the world, ma'am, could them rules affect us?" he asked. "We're sober, peaceful, and honest. All we ask is a fair night's sleep for our money. Does yore husband work for yuh?"

"My husband," she said, "has been dead twelve years."

"Twelve years? Ma'am, how on earth could a woman like you stay single that long?"

"She's keepin' his memory green," said Speedy soberly.

"Listen!" she snapped, leaning across the little desk toward Speedy. "I've met a lot of cowpoke comedians—and you ain't the best I've ever heard. Yore room is number six, upstairs and down the hall."

"I'll never forget yore kindness, ma'am," said Tombstone.

"Yo're forgettin' somethin' else," she said. "The rent is four-bits a day—in advance."

Speedy paid her.

"You forgot to write in where yo're from, and yore right names." she said.

She shoved the dog-eared register out to him and handed him an old pen, which she dipped in the dingy ink-bottle. Speedy registered and started for the stairs.

"Hey!" she said. "You didn't put in where yo're from."

"Nobody cares, ma'am," said Tombstone, "and I'm sure we don't. All we're interested in is where we're goin' from here."

"I could say somethin'—but I won't," she said quietly.

"There," remarked Speedy, as they closed the door of their room, "is my idea of a clingin' vine."

"Very femi-nine," agreed Tombstone soberly. "The poor thing is prob'ly sobbin' down there over what she said to us. I wonder if Old Man Green died a vi'lent death."

"I dunno about his death," said Speedy, "but I'll bet odds that he *lived* a vi'lent life."

CHAPTER III

The Loading Corral

NEXT morning Happy Holiday, the sheriff, received a telegram from E. T. Waite, which read:

AM SENDING BEST PRIVATE DETECTIVE AND DISTINGUISHED CRIMINAL LAWYER TO ASSIST MORTIMER. KEEP US ADVISED.

Windy Wethers showed the telegram to Tombstone and Speedy.

"I can figure it all out, except the last part," said Windy. "If he's got a detective and a lawyer, what good is our advice?"

"Yeah, that's right," agreed Tombstone. "How's the kid?"

"Mortimer? Oh, he's in good spirits. Bob Paterson, the prosecutin' attorney, was in the jail this mornin', tryin' to get Mortimer to confess that he shot Haley, and I think he got too close to the bars, him bein' quite bulldozerie in his talk. The kid got holt of his necktie and almost choked him stiff."

"There's somethin' awful likeable about that kid," said Tombstone soberly. "He'll go a long ways, if he has a chance."

"Yeah," nodded Windy. "And we'd have a hard time catchin' him."

Windy took them back to see the prisoner. Mortimer looked them over.

"Who are your gun-men friends?" he said to Windy.

"We're the firin' squad," said Speedy seriously. "They had us come in to see what size bullets we'd use on yuh. I'd recommend a twenty-two short, with a half charge of powder."

"Or a cap-pistol," said Tombstone soberly. "Hyah, Mortimer."

Mortimer chuckled.

"Human beings, after all. Howdy."

"I hear yore pa's sendin' yuh plenty help, Mortimer," said Tombstone.

"Yes, I believe he is. But what good

can a city detective do in this country. He probably will see his first cow down here. This is a long ways from Broadway. I told 'em the truth. I didn't kill Haley. Why, I didn't even know who he was. That man did steal a card. Oh, I wasn't too drunk to see that. It was the only court card in my hand, and I had a hunch to hold it for a kicker. But I threw it into the discards and drew three cards. That man took it, and beat me with kings-up. He drew two cards."

"Sounds reasonable," said Tombstone. "Who'd yuh say the man is?"

"He's Tex Evers," said Windy. "Cattle buyer."

"How'd you ever happen to come down here, Mortimer?" asked Speedy.

Mortimer grinned. "Paternal influence. Problem child. Dad had an idea that Arizona might mould my character. I like to have fun—and folks take me seriously. Don't misunderstand me—I like Arizona. In plain words, I got jipped. Uncle Edward Waite and my dad framed me. They said that after a couple of weeks, I'd have charge of the Blue Chip Cattle Company. And I was too green to realize what it meant. As a matter of fact, they did it to keep me from marrying a chorus girl and scandalizing the Aldrich family."

"So yuh got a gun and really put the family in bad," said Speedy.

"Yes." Mortimer nodded soberly. "I guess the sap in our family tree is where it can't run very far."

They went back to the office. Someone called from the street, and they went to the doorway. There was a man on a horse just up the street, and he seemed to be very drunk, sprawling over his saddle-horn, with the reins pulled tight to force the horse to go around in a circle.

"That man's hurt—or sick!" exclaimed Speedy, and they ran out to him.

There was blood on the man's hands, on his shirt, and a smear across his bearded face. A crowd was gathering, as they lifted him off the saddle and took him over to the shade of the office. He was trying to say something.

"Cattle rustlers—" he finally managed to whisper, and that was all.

Someone brought the doctor, but it was

Tombstone drew back his fist and hit Butch on the jaw, while Cravens edged around with his gun, trying to get a chance to shoot

too late for medical science. They took the body away.

"He's Con West," Windy said. "Owns the Lazy W, out here a few miles. Just a little spread—does his own work. Everybody liked Con."

"You heard what he said," reminded Tombstone. Windy nodded.

"Shot twice," said Speedy. "Bled t' death in the saddle."

About an hour later Windy and the sheriff found Speedy and Tombstone at the hotel, and drew them aside.

"You fellers ain't doin' anythin' for a couple days, are yuh?" Windy said.

They both shook their heads, and Windy explained that the Lazy W was without anybody to take care of it now, and would they help out the law by staying out there, until other arrangements could be made.

"I'll take yuh out there," said Windy. "There won't be much work."

"That part appeals to us," said Tombstone. "Why, shore, we'd be glad to help yuh out. Anythin' for the law, yuh know."

THEY saddled their horses and took their war-bags from the hotel. Tombstone grinned at Mrs. Green.

"Easy come, easy go," he said. "Mebbe we'll come back, ma'am."

"I'll worry about that, when I see yuh," she replied.

Windy explained some points of the country as they rode out there. Due north of the Lazy W, several miles away, was Broken Bend.

"It ain't much of a place any more," said Windy. "There used to be a couple spreads back there in the mountains, and they owned a shippin' corral at Broken Bend, but that was quite a while ago. Nobody ships from there any more. About all that's left is the depot and a little store. It ain't in this county; so we don't get up there very often."

The Lazy W was not an imposing place. The ranch-house was litle more than a shack of three rooms, the stable was in a tumble-down condition, and the corral fences needed repairs. Two horses were in the stable, but the boys turned them loose. A creaking, old windmill furnished plenty water. Windy saw them established in the ranch-house, and went back to West Fork.

"Well," sighed Tombstone, as they watched Windy ride away, "at last we're runnin' a spread, pardner."

"And it took murder to accomplish it," said Speedy.

"Ain't yuh happy over the job?"

"Why should I?" asked Speedy. "We came here to try and find out who killed Haley—not to run a poverty-stricken ranch."

"Yeah, that's right, ain't it. I wonder who killed Con West."

"He said it was rustlers."

A long-necked rooster, sans most of its feathers, came poking around a corner of the porch, and before Speedy knew what was going on, Tombstone drew his forty-five, and the rooster's career was ended right there. Speedy jumped a foot off his rickety chair, and reached for his gun, before realizing what had happened.

"I ain't et chicken for so long," sighed Tombstone. "Scare yuh?"

"No!" snapped Speedy, "I was just gettin' ready, in case he had a mate."

Speedy picked it up and examined it critically.

"Did Windy say how long we'd have to stay here?" he asked.

"Oh, three, four days."

"Not long enough," said Speedy. "This rooster was hatched the day before the Spanish-American War started."

It was the only chicken on the ranch. Speedy plucked it and got it ready for the pot, but not with any enthusiasm.

"The gravy ort to be good," said Tombstone.

"Properly prepared," said Speedy. "Slice it with a sharp knife and fry it. I've cooked these here road-runners before."

It wasn't tender by supper-time, so they cooked it until they went to bed. Speedy examined it.

"How yuh ever killed it with a forty-five is a mystery," he said. "Yuh can't dent it with a fork. I'll betcha it was Con West's pet."

They cooked it next morning, but the effect was negligible; so they left it on the stove and went for a ride. They drifted through the hills to the north, looking over the cattle. There were lots of Dollar Sign cattle, the mark of the Blue Chip company, a few of the Double H, but the Lazy W brand was nil.

They did not follow a road or trail, and their wandering took them to the top of a high mesa. At the far side of the mesa they could look down on what was left of the town of Broken Bend. It was at least a mile away.

They could see the railroad, winding back into the hills. There were several

horses tied around the old loading corrals, and some men were in the corral, but it was impossible to see what they were doing. A film of dust seemed to hover over the place.

"What are them waddies doin'?" asked Tombstone.

Speedy shook his head, as he rolled a smoke. "Too far to make it out," he said. "After all, it don't make any difference."

The men left the corral and rode away. Tombstone and Speedy then rode off the mesa, heading for Broken Bend, for no reason whatever, except curiosity. They came in past the old corrals and stopped to look them over. There was nothing to show what the men had been doing. In fact, the corrals looked as though they had not been used for a long time.

NEXT they went on over to the little store, where they bought a can of salmon and some crackers. The old man in the store was not a bit inclined to welcome them. They sat down on the porch of the store and ate their lunch.

"Old Sandy Claws is dyin' to know who we are," said Tombstone. "He's watchin' us from the back of the store."

"Keep yore eye on him," said Speedy.

"And lose my half of that salmon? Not me, pardner. Every time I take my eye off that can, you spear another hunk."

They finished their lunch and wandered over to the little depot. The agent, a short, wry-necked person, looked them over quizzically, as they stopped on the platform to look the place over. Then he came out.

"Somethin' I can do for you?" he asked.

"Didja have anythin' in mind?" asked Speedy.

"Did I—huh? Nope. Don't many folks come here—not strangers."

"After studyin' the situation," said Tombstone, "can yuh blame 'em."

"We was just kinda curious," said Speedy. "What was them cowpokes doin' out at the loadin' corral a little while ago?"

"Yeah," said Tombstone. "You ought t' know."

"Out . . . at . . . the . . . corral?" said the man, spacing his words carefully.

"Yeah," said Speedy. "Corral. The fenced enclosure, where they put the cows, before they punch 'em into cars for shipment. What was them men doin'?"

The agent's face hardened, but he laughed and shrugged his shoulders. His right hand lifted his overall jacket and he was tugging at his belt, as he said:

"Why, I don't believe I know what you're—"

And just then Tombstone hit him on the side of the jaw. It was a well-timed punch, backed by most of Tombstone's lean body, and the agent almost turned a cart-wheel against the wall of the depot. He crashed and slid to a sitting position, where he seemed to be looking cross-eyed at the toes of his shoes.

Tombstone reached inside the man's jacket and pulled out a short-barreled Colt forty-five. He balanced the gun in his left hand, a grin on his lean face.

"Prob'ly the worst idea he ever had, and it didn't work," he said quietly.

"Why, the little sidewinder!" snorted Speedy. "Wait'll his eyes line up again, and I'll cross 'em some more."

"What do yuh reckon he had in mind?" queried Tombstone.

"Our permanent de-mise, I reckon. Maybe he's loco. Livin' up here all the time—alone, as yuh might say. Sandy Claws ain't no company. Oh-oh! He's wakin' up. Maybe he'll talk."

The agent was awake, but dazed. He got to his feet, leaning heavily against the building and felt of his jaw. He masticated for a moment, spat some blood with his tobacco, and looked blank.

"Yore draw is too slow, my friend," said Tombstone. "Would yuh mind tellin' us jist why yuh hankered for that gun?"

"Gun?" he whispered. "I—I never had a gun."

"You shore hit him hard," said Speedy. "Maybe yuh knocked him back to his childhood."

"Where am I?" asked the man dumbly. "I—I don't remember."

"Well, after lookin' the place over, I can't feel sorry for yuh," said Tombstone. "It's a good place to forgit."

The agent moved slowly against the wall, seemingly very insecure on his feet.

They watched him curiously, wondering if the man had been permanently injured by that smash on the jaw. He suddenly came to life, and like a rabbit, going into a hole, he dived through the open doorway of the office, kicking the door shut behind him. It was on a spring-lock.

Before they realized what had happened, they heard another door bang shut.

"Look out!" snapped Speedy. "Maybe he's got another gun!"

They separated and ran around the

little depot, but the man was not in sight. They met around there and looked blankly at each other.

"Well, what's the difference?" Speedy said finally. "We didn't want him, anyway."

"The little son-of-a-gun!" said Tombstone. "Speedy, he must be plumb loco."

CHAPTER IV

Bullets From Outside

AFTER walking back to the front of the depot, they found the man was not there either, so they went back to their horses at the little store. The old proprietor stood in the doorway and watched them ride away, but did not speak.

"Nice little town, this Broken Bend," said Tombstone.

"Clannish," said Speedy. "Narrow-minded. I hope that rooster is still in the pot. After all that stewin', I'll bet he's still got stren'th enough to git up and crow."

"I'll believe most anythin' can happen down here," sighed Tombstone. "We still don't know what them cowpokes was doin'."

"Well, I'm not goin' back there to find out."

"By golly!" exclaimed Tombstone, "I didn't do so bad. I've still got that feller's gun. Should I take it back to him?"

"If yuh do, you go alone. I don't like Broken Bend."

They cooked the rooster three hours, ate bacon and eggs for supper and went to bed.

Windy came out next day, but they didn't tell him about their experience in Broken Bend.

While he was there, visiting with them, three riders dropped in—Bing Heppner, foreman and manager for the Blue Chip Cattle company, and two of his riders. Windy introduced Tombstone and Speedy, explaining to Heppner that they were taking care of the Lazy W until the law could do something about it.

Heppner was a tall raw-boned cowman, with an extremely long nose, high cheekbones and very small eyes. They sat in the shade and talked about things, especially the troubles of Mortimer Aldrich.

"I've had more blamed telegrams!" snorted Heppner, and laughed.

"His pa is rushin' millions for his defense, eh?" remarked Speedy.

"Somethin' like that. I wonder where Con West got shot."

"Through the body and right shoulder," said Speedy.

"I mean—where was he, when he got shot."

"That wouldn't do yuh any good to know," said Tombstone dryly. "He said the rustlers got him—and they wouldn't stay there."

"Have you had any experience with rustlers, Jones?" asked Heppner curiously.

"Only what I've read," said Tombstone. "They're awful mean."

"Do you do a lot of readin'?" asked Heppner.

"All I can," replied Tombstone truthfully.

The talk shifted to range conversation, and Broken Bend was mentioned.

"Oh, yeah, that's the place you told us about, Windy," Speedy said. "Didn't yuh say it wasn't in this county?"

"That's right, Speedy. Heppner's brother is the deputy sheriff over there. Have yuh seen Bob lately, Heppner?"

The tall foreman shook his head.

"I ain't seen Bob for ages."

Before they rode away Heppner asked: "How long are you boys goin' to be here at the Lazy W?"

"Until the law hires somebody else," replied Speedy.

"Or somebody shoots us," added Tombstone.

"You ain't expectin' anythin' like that, are yuh?" asked Heppner.

"There's two things to figure on," replied Tombstone. "One is life expectancy and the other is the law of averages. They say that they'll git yuh in the end."

They built a fire under the chicken-pot again, but there was little change in the condition of the bird. Speedy threw in a handful of rice and a chopped onion, and announced that as far as he was concerned—that was the end. It was after dark when Speedy made a triumphant announcement.

"His skin busted in two places, Tombstone!" he said. "It looks like he'd done succumbed."

Tombstone drew the chairs up to the

table, tucked the end of a towel into the collar of his shirt, sat down and waved a knife.

"Lemme at him," he said. "I like 'em tough."

Speedy grinned. "You'll shore get your likes."

He picked up the big stew-pot and started for the table.

Wham! The pot exploded. At least something exploded, leaving the pot-handle in Speedy's hand, and covering him with steaming chicken, rice and gravy. Tombstone went over backwards in his chair, his flailing feet knocking the lamp off the table, and the kitchen was plunged in darkness.

"Git down!" blurted Tombstone.

"The ch-chicken busted!" gasped Speedy. "Didja ever—"

"Git down, I tell yuh! Somebody hit that pot with a bullet!"

SPEEDY sat down heavily. "Bullet, eh?" he said. "Well, I'll bet I'm the best tastin' cowpoke in this country."

"Didn't yuh hear the shot, Speedy?"

"With both ears full of chicken frig-a-see? Where'd it come from? Which way?"

"Through that open winder."

"Huh! That pot's plumb ruined."

"Never mind the pot. That bullet didn't miss my head a inch. We've got to find out what this is all about."

"Don't light a match—this place is all over kerosene. Whew! I hope it don't git on the rooster—wherever he's at."

"I'll bet that bullet blew him all to pieces."

"Yo're awful optomistic," said Speedy. "C'mon with me. We'll crawl outside and have a look."

There was no light in the main room. Speedy opened the front door carefully, and they crawled out on the rickety porch. It was quite dark out there. In fact, it was so dark that Tombstone, crawling on his hands and knees, fell off the end of the porch, and swore aloud. From two different directions came spits of flame, and two bullets smashed into the lower part of the old door.

Tombstone was mad. Guessing the locations of the flashes, he sent a shot at each of them. Speedy snaked off the other end of the old porch, where he crouched, gun ready, listening.

He heard a sound, as though someone had stepped on a dry twig, and he located a dark bulk, near a section of old fence. Speedy steadied his old Colt, and spurted flame in that direction.

A man yelped painfully and began running.

"Yo're trade-marked, you dirty Apache!" Speedy yelled.

"Don't belittle a decent red-man," said Tombstone, and sent another shot down toward the old stable, where he thought he saw somebody.

There was a babel of voices down there, but too far away for the two cowboys to hear what was said. No more shots were fired, and shortly after that they heard horses galloping away from the ranch.

They went back into the house, covered the windows, barred the doors and took another lamp into the kitchen. The stewed rooster was on top of the stove, unhurt by the bullet, but the pot, hit by a soft-nose bullet, was almost unrecognizable. Cooked rice was all over everything. Speedy's face was still greasy from a faceful of gravy. He put the chicken on a plate and placed it on the table.

"I ain't as hongry as I was," said Tombstone.

"There ain't as much to eat as there was," said Speedy. "I wish I knew why

[*Turn page*]

TOPS FOR QUALITY
BIGGER AND BETTER

folks allus try to kill us, Tombstone."

Speedy put his elbows on the table and rested his chin in his hands.

"It most always happens to us."

"Yea-a-ah. And Jim Keaton wants us to save up for our old age."

Neither of them said anything for a while, and then Tombstone said absently:

" 'Course, if yuh figure the law of averages—"

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Speedy. "Do yuh reckon that blasted depot agent is behind this trouble?"

Tombstone took a butcher knife and tried to detach one leg from the rooster. It came off, but very unwillingly, and he looked it over critically.

"How are we fixed for bacon and aigs?" he asked.

"I dunno," sighed Speedy. "I ain't hongry—much."

"Aw, shucks, we've got to keep up our stren'th, pardner. We drove them coyotes back to their den; so everythin' is all right. When Old Tombstone levels on 'em, they tuck their tails between—"

Kerwham! A hail of buckshot tore out the window and the blanket covering, swept the table of everything, including the coffee-pot, but excepting the lamp. The chimney went away in a shower of glass, but the lamp stayed there bravely, the flame sending up a smoke spiral.

Both Tombstone and Speedy hit the floor, almost before the dishes stopped falling.

"Yeah, yo're right," said Speedy. "They tucked their tails. Man, they busted every dish we've got—and that coffee-pot looks like a sieve."

TOMBSTONE slid backwards and braced his back against the wall.

"I'm irked," he announced, and began rolling a cigarette.

Speedy chuckled and Tombstone looked reprovingly at him.

"Buckshot hit the rooster," said Speedy. "At least, he must be dead by this time. What'll we do now—go to bed hungry?"

"No! Over on that shelf is a can of peaches, and there's some crackers on the shelf below it. And we'll set on the floor to eat. Yuh know, Speedy, I wonder how Con West lasted as long as he did."

"Maybe," said Speedy dryly, "it took that long for the law of averages to catch up with him."

Windy Wethers came out early next morning, bringing word that Mortimer's lawyer and detective had arrived in West Fork.

"The country, includin' Mortimer, is saved," he announced grandly.

"Yeah," said Tombstone dryly. "And when he's through savin' Mortimer, we've got another savin' job for him to work on."

They showed Windy the effects of bullets and buckshot, and told him what happened last night. Windy looked at the smashed dishes, scored table-top, bullet-holes, and shook his head in amazement.

"Yuh know, I've done worked me out a theory, Windy," said Tombstone. "Somebody's shippin' cows from Broken Bend."

"Nobody ships from there, Tombstone. "Ain't for years."

"Listen, m' child," said Tombstone, and proceeded to tell Windy about the depot agent at Broken Bend.

"Well, I reckon it is possible," said Windy. "I'll go back and have Happy send a telegram to the sheriff over there."

"That's fine," said Speedy dryly. "That'll settle the whole deal. They'll quit shippin'—and that's that. What we want to do is to put the deadwood on this whole blasted gang, Windy. They murdered Haley, 'cause he was a detective."

"Yea-a-ah—maybe they did! Huh? What's to be done about it?"

"We're tired of bein' assassinated," said Tombstone. "We've both got permanent goose-pimples. They've done missed us so far, but—"

"The law of averages will get yuh in the end," finished Speedy.

"My idea, exactly," said Tombstone.

"But how are yuh goin' to find out anythin'?"

"I've got me a idea," said Tombstone. "You come with us, Windy. If that depot agent ain't quit his job, it might work out."

"I can't go officially," said Windy, " 'cause that ain't in my county."

"Be an immigrant—who cares?" said Speedy.

They went to Broken Bend, came in behind the depot, and found the agent half-asleep in his little office. He came to life so quickly that his hat fell off, but made no further move.

"Jist remain calm—or git collected, pardner," Tombstone drawled.

"What do you want?" he asked defiantly.

"Somethin' very simple. All we want is a report on the number of cars of cows shipped out of here this week."

The agent grinned crookedly.

"Nobody ships from here," he said.

"We'll look at the list, if yuh don't mind," said Tombstone.

"There ain't no list. Where'd yuh ever git the idea that somebody shipped from here?"

Tombstone grinned. "How'd you like to ride over to West Fork and tell that to the sheriff? And while yo're gone the man who comes to take over yore job will give us the list."

The agent was worried. He shifted his eyes away and swallowed painfully.

"Don't git any sudden ideas, pardner," Speedy said.

"I'm not," the agent said wearily. "I'm not tryin' to get away. I just can't leave here now. I'll come over and talk with the sheriff—but I can't, until they can send in a new man to relieve me."

"That's sensible," agreed Tombstone. "How long will that take?"

"Two or three days. I'll ask for leave."

"All right." Tombstone nodded. "You come over as soon as yuh can, and bring them lists, will yuh?"

"Why sure, I—I'll come. Be glad to."

"Jist don't forget it," said Tombstone, and they walked out.

Back at their horses, Windy frowned.

"Listen, High Pockets—we'll never see that jasper again."

"Don't yuh think we will?"

"If he's guilty of what you say he is, we won't."

"I scared him, didn't I? All right, he's scared. We stake out in the brush. Just as soon as he pulls out we trail him. Yuh see, Windy? He ain't worth a nickel to us—alone. What we want is to find out who he's workin' for."

"Yea-a-a-ah!" whispered Windy. "I was thinkin' of that, too."

"An' I got another idear," Tombstone said, his eyes sharpening.

"Two idears in one night is an awful lot, ain't it?" Speedy asked.

"Not for me," Tombstone replied. "The idear is to find out who is the brains behind all these hyar shenanigans."

"That's the same as the first idear," said Speedy. "Ain't it, Windy?"

"No, it ain't," Tombstone maintained. "The first idea was to find out where this agent is going and to follow him."

"That's so we could follow him to his boss," Speedy pointed out.

"Kin yuh do the second before the first?" Tombstone demanded.

CHAPTER V

"We Spooked Him!"

IT WAS almost dark, when the agent left the depot and went over to the little stable behind the general store, where he saddled a horse and pulled out of Broken Bend. He cut into a trail, which went back through the hills, and the three men came in behind him.

"I know this trail," Windy said. "It leads to the Double H. Brad Hess owns that spread, and he's got several cowpokes workin' for him."

"Nice people?" asked Speedy.

"Good as any, I reckon. The Double H shipped a big load of cows from Northridge last month. I checked the brands myself."

"It's goin' to be pretty dog-gone dark for trailin'," said Speedy. "I hope you know the country, Windy."

"Well, I can find the Double H, if that's what yuh mean. This here trail plays out about a mile or so from the ranch, but it's all open country. But what's to be done, after we get there?"

"What do yuh do, when you've got deuces and treys in a five-handed jack-pot?" Speedy asked.

"Well," laughed Windy, "I play 'em close to my wishbone."

"All right. That's all we've got in this jack-pot."

It was slow traveling over that old trail, and it was very dark, when the trail ended.

Windy was a little confused as to the direction to the ranch. Here was an old road, which hadn't been used for a long time, and as Windy tried to figure out his directions, they heard a vehicle coming on the road. They swung quickly aside, but the vehicle had turned north into a big swale.

They could hear it plainly, bumping along, wheels rattling over stones. Then it stopped. The three men got off their horses, and went quietly on foot. They heard the rattle of what sounded like a shovel, and a man swore feelingly. The light of a lantern guided them now, and they stopped behind a fringe of mesquite.

Two men were working around some sort of a hole in the ground.

"It ain't big enough, I tell yuh," one of the men said. "That box is two feet longer'n the hole. Gimme that pick."

There was some sort of a box. The lantern-light illuminated one end of it. There was a team of horses and a buckboard.

"I never done anythin' like this before, and I don't like it," another voice said. "Why didn't they dig the hole big enough in the first place?"

A horse was galloping along the old road, swerved and came straight toward the two men. Tombstone, Speedy and Windy crouched low, as the man rode in close and dismounted.

"Brad wants yuh to come back right now," the rider blurted. "That blasted depot agent just got here and things look bad. We've got to have a talk. Yuh can come back and finish the job later."

They put out the lantern, jumped into the buckboard, and drove out of there as fast as the team could travel, followed by the man on the horse.

Tombstone chuckled.

"We was awful close behind that depot jasper. Maybe he'd never been over here before. Let's see what's in that box."

Windy lighted the lantern and they looked gingerly at that box. It looked an awful lot like a rough casket. Tombstone lifted one end, put it down quickly.

"Speedy, you take that pick and see if yuh can take off the top," he said hollowly.

The top wasn't nailed too securely, and Speedy pried it loose. Windy had the lantern. He took a deep breath.

"That's Dick Rose," he whispered huskily. "I'd know him anywhere!"

"He's dead," said Tombstone. "Awful dead, too."

"Yuh only git jist so dead," declared Speedy.

They squatted on their heels and thought things over.

"It ain't legal," said Speedy. "Yuh can't jist go around plantin' folks thataway—no preacher—nothin'. Got a blanket around him."

"I've got a idea," said Tombstone. "It ain't so awful nice, but it's shore different. Let's swipe the body and hide it."

"I ain't never done nothing like that," said Windy. "It ain't in my line."

"It'll give 'em a shock," said Tombstone. "This jigger has been shot, and they don't dare let anybody know. Let's do it."

Speedy and Windy got the two corners of the blanket around the man's shoulders, while Tombstone carried his feet. They took the corpse about a hundred feet up the canyon, and hid it in the brush, being careful to cover the corpse securely in the blanket.

"I feel like a blasted gowl," said Windy.

"The right word is gull," said Tombstone.

"A gull," said Speedy, "is a bird."

"I never studied botany," said Tombstone. "Let's sneak back."

AFTER picking a good spot, they hid in close to the grave, listening closely for the return of the two men. In about thirty minutes they came back, but there were three of them this time. They wasted no time in enlarging the hole, and there was no conversation.

"That's big enough," a man said. "Let's plant him and git back. I'll take this end and you two grab the other. He ain't very heavy."

It was rather difficult to see what happened, except that one man dropped his end of the empty box, and the other two jumped back. No one said anything for a few moments, and then one man gasped:

"He's gone!"

"He can't—he's dead!" blurted another. "Look! He kicked the top loose and got out!"

"Got out?" gasped one of them. "Dead men don't—"

"The blazes, they don't! I'm pullin' out!"

That could have been a triple announcement, because they all went into that buckboard, like three quail sailing into a bush. Those two frightened horses reared, flailing backwards.

"We forgot to untie 'em!" yelled one of the men.

It was too late to bother about that, because one of the horses started kicking the front end out of the buckboard, and the three men unloaded. Then the tie rope busted and that team almost ran over Tombstone, Speedy and Windy, who dodged behind a rock, moving very fast.

Those three other men kept right on running toward the Double H ranch, while the frightened team proceeded to distribute parts of that buckboard up the canyon, until they broke loose and went their separate ways.

Tombstone, Speedy and Windy hammered each other on the backs and whooped with unholy mirth.

"We spooked 'em!" choked Tombstone. "That was a good'n!"

"We scared 'em so bad they forgot to untie their broncs," said Windy huskily. "Mamma mine, I never seen anythin' like that!"

"Did you recognize them three men, Windy?" asked Speedy.

"Shore. Jim Cravens, Ed Wheeler and Butch Neely. Butch is the big one, who wanted to carry one end of the box. He's awful strong."

"Nice people," said Tombstone. "Let's go down to the Double H and see what we can hear."

"That's bad English," said Speedy. "Yuh don't see the things yuh hear."

"This ain't no time to be finicky, Speedy. Let's go."

Windy led them down to the Double H. The old ranchhouse was in a grove of trees, and it was too dark to see what the place looked like, but there were a number of men at the stable and corrals, saddling by lantern-light.

The three men worked their way in close to the corral, and watched the group of men gallop away. One man went back to the house with the lantern.

"There was six men in that bunch," Windy said. "That makes it right—Hess has six, men, includin' himself."

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Speedy quietly. "Only six men? Well, if only six rode away—that don't leave any. And one is dead. It don't figure out, Windy."

"Maybe only five rode away," said Windy.

"Education is a blasted nuisance," declared Tombstone. "We saw one man stay, didn't we? That proves yo're wrong, Speedy."

Windy enumerated the Double H crew. "There's Jim Cravens, Ed Wheeler, Butch Neely, Dick Rose, Brad Hess and Monk Mahley."

"Dick Rose is dead—and that leaves five," said Speedy.

"Allus arguin'," sighed Tombstone. "Let's find out."

They went straight to the rambling ranchhouse, and were near the kitchen door, when a man came out, gathered up an armful of wood, and was almost in the house, when Tombstone's forty-five bored into the small of his back. He dropped the wood, drew a shuddering breath and turned around. It was the depot agent.

They shoved him into the lighted kitchen, and he looked as though he was about to collapse.

"No, yuh can't faint on us agin, mister," Tombstone said. "Set down and rest the rubber in yore knees. Watch him, Windy. We'll examine the house."

The main room was empty, but in a small bedroom they found a man in bed. The man was evidently quite sick. Speedy went back and brought Windy and his prisoner in to look at the sick man.

"Why, that's Tex Evers, the cattle buyer!" gasped Windy. "Hey, you!" He turned to the depot-agent. "What are they runnin' here—a cow-ranch or a hospital?"

BUT the depot agent shut his lips tightly, refusing to talk. Tex looked at them rather indifferently.

"Don't yuh know me, Tex?" Windy said.

Tex didn't say. Tombstone drew the covers back, disclosing that Tex's body had been crudely bandaged. Windy shook the agent.

"Who shot him?" he asked. "Yo're goin' to have to talk, feller."

"I'm not talkin'," said the man stubbornly.

"Who killed Dick Rose?"

The agent merely took a deep breath and shook his head.

"I hit a man last night," said Speedy. "I heard him yelp."

Tombstone looked the agent over thoughtfully.

"What are we goin' to do with this here willer-the-whisp?" he asked. "We ort to hang him as a warnin', but that'd be wastin' a good rope. Huh! We've got to leave him here. Can't leave a sick man all alone. What do you fellers think about him?"

"Might as well," said Windy.

"We can't be bothered with him," said Speedy. "Yuh know what I think? I'll betcha that gang have gone to try and dry-gulch us at the ranch or on the road to West Fork."

"How's that for a guess?" asked Tombstone, directing his question at the depot agent.

"Wait and find out," he said harshly.

"We ain't waitin', pardner—we're headin' for trouble. Take care of Tex, will yuh? He's through buyin' cows, anyway. Windy, is there a short-cut back to the Lazy W?"

"Yeah," nodded Windy. "Down through Emigrant Canyon. It ain't a good trail, but we can shore save miles. Ready to hit

the grit?"

They searched the agent, but he had no gun. There was a Winchester rifle on pegs on the wall. It was fully loaded. Tombstone took out the shells, smashed the stock off against the fireplace and hung the remains up on its dangling lever.

"Grin and bear it, pardner," he said to the agent, and they went out.

As they mounted their horses Windy gave a mournful shake of his head.

"Yo're awful humane, Tombstone—leavin' that blamed crook to take care of Tex."

"Yeah, I shore am, Windy. Wait and see what happens."

Within thirty minutes a man left the house, kept in the heavy shadows all the way down to the stable, where they lost track of him for a while. But he finally rode away, going fast.

"He's shore a trustin' soul," remarked Speedy.

"Is he headin' for Emigrant Canyon?" asked Tombstone.

"No, he ain't," replied Speedy. "He's headin' for the Blue Chip spread."

Tombstone chuckled. "That's good. Yo're the leadin' man, Windy. Take us through Emigrant Canyon."

CHAPTER VI

Prisoners

HOURS passed. It required nearly all the rest of the night to find their way down that interminable canyon, but they finally came out on the flat country north of the Lazy W, saddle-weary and sleepy. It was beginning to get daylight, as they dismounted in a swale north of the ranchhouse. They climbed to a rocky rim where they could sprawl in the rocks and look down on the ranch layout.

There was not a sign of life around the place, but they knew that appearances might be very deceitful.

After a while Speedy spoke.

"The shade on that side window was down when we left," he said.

"That's right," agreed Tombstone. "We had all the winders covered."

The sun came up, but there was no sign of life.

"I'll bet Happy is wonderin' what became of me," Windy said.

"Yuh know, if them fellers can stop us three—they're in the clear," said Speedy. "Nobody else knows what we know."

"It's a wonderful feelin'." Tombstone smiled. "Knowin' somethin' that nobody else knows. But it's dangerous. Now, yuh take—oh-oh!"

A horse and buggy had swung into the ranchhouse yard. It pulled up at the porch and two men got out.

The three men craned their necks, trying to see who they were. The view was momentary, as they went up the rickety steps, the corner of the house cutting off the view of the front door.

"If that wasn't Happy Holiday, I'll eat my shirt," Windy said.

"If it was—they're trapped," said Tombstone.

A minute or so later a man came out—a smaller man than either of the two who went in. He jumped into the buggy and drove swiftly away, heading toward West Fork, but they saw him swing off the road into a heavy growth of mesquite, where he left the horse and buggy, and came hurrying back.

Things were not so good in the ranchhouse. The sheriff and his companion were seated on an old bench, disarmed, looking rather uncomfortable. Facing them, hunched on a chair, was a masked man, with a gun in his hand. Near the side window that Speedy declared had been covered, sat another masked man with a Winchester rifle, keeping watch through the window, while another masked man watched the window at the other end of the room.

The sheriff's companion was a big man, well-dressed, hard-eyed and big-fisted.

"I don't know what this is all about," the sheriff said.

"Yuh don't need to know," said the masked man. "Who's yore friend?"

"Timothy McGrew is my name," growled the sheriff's companion.

"What's yore business, McGrew?"

"None of yours."

The masked man laughed. "Forked, eh?"

"I am a private detective, if it is any of your business."

"Private detective, eh? Oh, yo're the man that Waite sent out to try and get the Aldrich kid out of jail. Yo're doin' fine, McGrew."

"Would yuh mind tellin' me what you

boys are doin' here?" asked the sheriff.

"We're waitin' for yore bloodhounds to show up."

"*My* bloodhounds?"

"Yeah—Jones, Smith and Wethers."

"That's a new one," said the sheriff. "Windy came out here yesterday, and hasn't come back. Jones and Smith are runnin' this place."

"I hope they remember that. There's two rifles here, and two in the stable. The roads to West Fork are all blocked. If I was you I'd start pickin' out another deputy, and two other men to run this spread."

"But what on earth have them three men done?"

"They stuck their nose into our business."

"Oh!"

One of the men at a window spoke now.

"I don't like this deal. They should be back here by this time. Maybe they went to West Fork—off the road."

"Why would they?" asked the man facing the sheriff. "They don't know what we've planned for them."

The man at the south window swore feelingly, his profanity directed at one certain man, name not mentioned.

"What's that blasted fool doin' here, sneakin' in? Better talk to him outside."

"Watch these two," ordered the man who had acted as spokesman, and went quickly outside.

THOSE old walls were not soundproof, and they heard the masked man say:

"What are you doin' out here? How do yuh expect—"

"Wait a minute! Them three came to the Double H after you left last night. They know everything. They let Frank go. He says they're wise to the blocked roads and all that. Now, what'll we do?"

"How could they be wise? Did Frank talk?"

"He says he didn't, and I don't think he did. The devil's to pay—and no pitch hot! We can't block all the country. They can get into town and we can't stop 'em."

"What else did he say?"

"Well, nothin' much, except that they're wise to everythin'."

"Mebbe that's why they didn't show up here."

"That's a cinch. I'm draggin' out of this country—fast."

"Turnin' yellow, eh?"

"No—I'm gettin' smart."

"You ain't runnin' out on us—not yet. We're going to need all the guns we've got."

"You mean—I don't go?"

"That's exactly what I mean. I'm runnin' this—why, you—"

A shot blasted the stillness, followed by the thump of a falling body on the porch. The man at the north window raced for the door, flung it open and almost fell over the body of the man who had gone out to meet the newcomer.

Ripping out a curse, he ran to the corner, and a moment later his rifle blasted, the echoes rattled back from the hills. He came back, still cursing, and slammed the door.

"Miss him?" asked the other man tensely.

"I did not—the yellow pup!"

"It's workin' out fine," he said bitterly. "Two men dead—and three are still alive. Well, we've shore advertised that we're right here on the job."

Tombstone, Speedy and Windy had no idea what was causing all the disturbance at the house, nor why the occupants were shooting each other. They had seen the man leave his horse some distance from the house and come in on foot. They saw two men come outside, heard the two shots, and saw a running man collapse short of his horse.

"I've got a hunch," said Tombstone, "that somebody is gettin' worried."

"That's me," said Windy. "I'm worried about what's happenin' to Happy Holiday."

"You stay here and keep watch while me and Speedy investigate that stable," said Tombstone. "I kinda feel there's men in it."

They slid off the crest and made their way down the swale, cut to the right and fairly snaked their way across a dry-wash, screened by willows, and came out almost against the north end of the stable. They crawled in close and listened.

Two men were arguing over what had happened. Evidently one of the men had seen some of it from the hay-hole in the loft.

"I tell yuh, it was Monk Mahley who shot that feller on the porch," he said. "He didn't have on no mask."

"Who shot Monk?"

"I ain't sure, but I think it was Jim Cravens."

"Well, what's goin' on, anyway? They

warned us to set tight and not make any noise, and they're blastin' each other. I don't like it. That sheriff and his pardner are still in there. That's the worst of it—we don't know what's goin' on."

"And," added the other man wearily, "it ain't what we came here to do. I tell yuh, Tommy, I don't like it. If anythin' happens, we're like rats in a trap."

"Well, what's yore idea, Ed?"

"High-tail, while there's time. We can go to Broken Bend and hop a freight train."

"Yeah, yeah, that's right. Wait! We don't dare go out that door. Maybe we can pry a board loose from the back. The horses are back in the brush, and they can't see us from the house."

Tombstone and Speedy slid around to the rear of the stable. It was easy to find the board they were working on, because it was almost at the corner. Working the board loose required some labor, because they didn't want to make any noise.

It was finally pulled back far enough to allow them to crawl through. They were both still on their hands and knees, when they discovered that somebody was on each side of them.

EACH man had a rifle, in addition to the guns in their holsters, but they were in no position to do anything about it, so they just held perfectly still.

"Them boys are well trained," said Speedy quietly.

"Yeah, that's right," agreed Tombstone.

"We were just goin' away," said one of them painfully.

"Yeah, we heard yuh say yuh was," replied Tombstone. "Changed yore minds, ain't yuh? Nice mornin' to be goin' places. If yuh don't mind, we'll relieve yuh of them guns, before yuh git some ideas like yore friends up in the house.

One of the men sat up, his back against the boards.

"Do you know what happened up there?" he asked. "We don't."

"We don't know what the idea was, but yo're shy two men."

"Yeah, it looks thataway."

"Are you from the Double H?"

"No. Shut up, Ed—they know too much already!"

"We don't care if yuh talk or not," said Speedy.

"You was kinda figurin' on makin' a getaway," said Tombstone. "Don'tcha think yo're gettin' nervous early in the game?"

"I don't think we'll do any talkin'," said the man called Ed. "The less we say, the better off we'll be."

"Who killed Dick Rose?" asked Speedy.

Ed looked up at them, his lips grim.

"So you fellers stole him out of the box, eh?" he said.

"Uh-huh. My, my, you boys are spooky! The way yuh went out of there—forgettin' to untie the team. And who shot Tex Evers?"

"No *entender*."

"Yuh didn't intend to?" snorted Speedy.

"No, no," said Tombstone. "That's Spanish. He means he don't understand."

"I'll get some ropes," said Speedy, and crawled into the stable.

It was a simple matter for them to hog-tie the two men. They leaned them up against the stable, crawled into the stable and looked things over. They had two extra Colts, and two Winchesters. The house was quiet, Speedy offered to go back and find Windy.

"Might as well be together," said Tombstone. "Go ahead."

Speedy had been gone about ten minutes, when a man came out of the house. He was a big man, wearing a mask. Tombstone watched him from a crack in the wall near the door. The masked man scanned the country for several moments, finally made up his mind, and came hurrying down to the stable. Outside the door he called:

"Ed! It's me—Butch!"

"C'mon in," said Tombstone.

Butch Neely opened the door and stepped into the muzzle of Tombstone's Colt. He recoiled quickly, but did not reach for a gun.

"C'mon in, Butch," said Tombstone pleasantly. "Glad t' meetcha. My name's Jones. Jist shut the door, will yuh?"

Butch's muscles tensed.

"If yuh do, yuh die, Butch!" Tombstone said sharply.

The big man relaxed and shut the door. Tombstone took his gun and made him sit down on the floor. The big man's eyes swept the dim interior of the stable. Tombstone said:

"They're both outside, tied up, Butch. Yuh see, they was pullin' out on yuh. It's gettin' so yuh can't even trust a rustler any more."

Butch swore bitterly, and Tombstone grinned.

"Lemme see," mused Tombstone. "Two dead men, three captives. Butch, yore fightin' force is ravelin' out on yuh."

Butch spat viciously and glared up at Tombstone.

"It *ain't* my gang," he said.

"Is there more'n one gang, Butch?"

"You find out—yo're so blasted smart!"

CHAPTER VII

Rustler Cleanup

OUTSIDE of the stable there was a noise, and Tombstone twisted his neck in that direction. The tall cowpoke was off guard for a second, but in that second Butch Neely leaped. Butch was as powerful as a gorilla, and his brawny arms encircled Tombstone's slender torso. Tombstone's upper arms were clamped, but he was able to fling his six-shooter aside.

"I'll bust yore danged ribs!" rasped Butch, as he swung Tombstone around, and then cursed bitterly as Tombstone's high heels came down on his insteps.

He managed to jerk one foot away, only to get Tombstone's toe against his shinbone, driven with plenty of force. Butch yelped, and they went into a waltz, until Tombstone's left foot tangled with Butch's right, and they crashed against the door, which was not fastened, and the two men fell out into the open.

Here was plenty of space and light. Up to now the fight had been merely a test of strength and agility. Butch had not been able to hit Tombstone, and Tombstone had been content to harass the bigger man, but as they rolled into the yard Butch was obliged to let loose for a moment, and Tombstone hammered a right fist into Butch's nose.

The next few moments was a dusty scene of flailing legs and arms, as Butch cursed witheringly, and tried fairly to tear the lengthy Tombstone into shreds. But Tombstone didn't tear easily. He got his left hand loose and proceeded to hammer Butch's nose some more, as though using a gavel.

Perhaps the scene was more than Jim Cravens' nerves could stand. He came galloping down from the house, swinging a six-shooter high, and yelling for Butch to take it easy. Butch, of course, couldn't hear him, because his ears were full of dust, and Tombstone was still drumming on his sore nose.

Cravens ran in close, trying to get an open shot at Tombstone, but the two men were twisting and rolling too fast. Cravens fired one shot, which only served to insert a handful of gravel into the scalp of Butch's already-sore head.

Just then Cravens saw Speedy and Windy, racing across the drywash. He snapped one shot at them, turned and raced for the protection of the house, with bullets fanning his flying feet. He fairly fell into the house.

Butch, realizing that there was shooting going on, shoved Tombstone aside and tried to wipe the dust out of his eyes. They were both on the ground. Tombstone drew back his right fist, took careful aim, and hit Butch square on the jaw.

Cravens fired a shot from a window, and the bullet tugged at Tombstone's collar. Speedy and Windy were going through the stable doorway, and Tombstone limped in behind them. He was splashed with Butch's blood, but was uninjured. Butch was flat on his back, sleeping peacefully in the corral-dust.

Tombstone tried to wipe the dust out of his eyes with his sleeve.

"Can't even trust yuh alone for five minutes," Speedy said. "The idea of you goin' out there and pick a fight with that big brute! It's a wonder that other *pelicano* didn't kill yuh."

"What other *pelicano?*" asked Tombstone.

"The one which was tryin' to shoot yuh."

"Oh, yeah," said Tombstone, blinking painfully. "I think I heard him."

Windy shook his head. "He *thinks* he heard him, Speedy."

"Yea-a-ah! His ears are very a-cute, Windy. He hears the grass growin'. Well, well, the big feller is wakin' up!"

Butch was back on his feet, one hand clinging to the corral fence. A voice yelled from the open window at the house:

"Do you fellers hear me?"

"You don't think we're deaf, do yuh?" yelled Windy. "Butch, you stay put!"

"Listen t' me!" yelled the man. "You let Butch come up here!"

"Let him try it!" called Speedy. "Hold fast, Butch!"

"Butch is comin' up here," said the man firmly. "If one of yuh interfere, I'll kill the sheriff and his dumb pardner. I mean it."

"Yo're bluffin'," called Windy.

"Try it and see, you knot-head! I ain't got anythin' to lose. Come here, Butch!"

"What'd he say?" asked Butch. "I can't hear a danged thing."

"Shall we take a chance?" asked Windy. "I think he's bluffin'."

"What'd yuh say?" asked Butch.

"Oh, go on!" snapped Windy. "Yo're holdin' up the show."

"He thinks he's holdin' up the fence," said Speedy.

"What's all the talk about?" queried Tombstone blankly. "I'm as deaf as a post."

"This," said Speedy," is a fine situation."

"Butch!" yelled the man at the window. "Come here!"

BUTCH looked over at the stable doorway.

"Didja hear that?" he asked. "What'd he want?"

"Go up and find out!" yelled Speedy.

Butch nodded dumbly and headed for the house. He was not too secure on his feet and he limped on one leg, the effects of the shin-kicks delivered by Tombstone. He finally went into the house.

"What's our next move?" asked Windy.

"Dig the dirt out of Tombstone's ears, I reckon. Tombstone, how come you and Butch fightin' out there?"

Tombstone got enough of the question to reply:

"I captured him, but he jumped me and we fell outside. He's as strong as a bull, that feller, I'll bet every one of m' ribs are sprung."

"Didn't yuh see that man tryin' to shoot yuh?"

"Pardner," replied Tombstone soberly, "when that feller gits holt of yuh—yuh don't have no time to ad-mire the view."

"We ain't gettin' no place foolin' around like this," complained Windy. "We've got to git Happy loose."

Speedy looked at him critically.

"Git Happy loose, huh?" he said. "Windy, by any chance, did you git hit, too?"

"I mean the sheriff, Happy Holiday."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot him. Who's the person with him?"

"I dunno—some big feller—wearin' store clothes. Wait! Say, I'll bet he's the detective the Blue Chip sent for."

Tombstone grinned.

"I wish he'd git out his magnifyin'-glass and tell us what to do next."

"I'll bet he ain't short on clues," added Speedy. "Associatin' with Butch and Jim Cravens, I'll betcha he knows who killed Cock Robin."

"Is he dead, too?" asked Tombstone. "That makes three—if yuh don't count Tex Evers and Dick Rose. I've got me a idea."

"Sounds like yuh might have," agreed Windy. "What is it?"

"There's only one winder that faces south. I can circle the place and come in on that side. Mebbe I can do some good."

"Yuh better keep yore head down," advised Speedy, as Tombstone crawled out past the loose board at the back of the stable. He grinned at the two captives, who merely looked straight ahead. But as Tombstone stepped over to the corner Ed Wheeler spoke.

"Who got killed with all them shots?"

"Cock Robin," replied Tombstone, and slid into the dry-wash.

Things were very quiet around there. Crows winged their way up and down the dry-wash. A magpie scolded from a post of the lower corral. Except for a sprawled figure on the porch, and one out beside an old fence, south of the house, there was no menace at the Lazy W. Speedy and Windy relaxed and waited for the next move.

Tombstone had been gone about thirty minutes. Inside the ranchhouse Jim Cravens was getting nervous. They had the sheriff and the detective securely tied, but they knew that this deal must come to an end very soon. Butch wanted to leave the place and get away.

"They've got Ed and Tommy tied up," he said. "Monk Mahley is dead and so is Bing Heppner. We can't do nothin', Jim. If they git us, we'll all hang."

Jim Cravens looked at the sheriff and detective.

"I've got a idea how to git Tommy and Ed loose," he said. "You stay here, Butch, and I'll go down to the stable. I'll tell 'em that unless they let Ed and Tommy loose, you'll shoot the sheriff and the other galoot."

"I'll do it, too," declared Butch grimly. "Go ahead."

"Now, listen, Butch. If there's a shot fired—you go to work. I think they'll listen t' me. If I can git Ed and Tommy loose, we'll be four to three. Anyway, we

can go out that window and git to the horses without 'em seein' us. Maybe we can get away."

"Can't I shoot the sheriff, anyway, Jim?"

"Maybe—later. Wait for a signal from me. If they start anythin'—I'll duck and shoot. Sabe?"

Butch nodded. He was just in the proper frame of mind to do murder. His nose was swollen and very sore, and one tooth hung by a thread. Happy Holiday was anything but happy, and Timothy McGrew looked very grim. This was a fine way for a celebrated private detective to end his career.

SPEEDY and Windy saw Jim Cravens leave the house and start for the stable. Cravens held both empty hands in sight, indicating that he was on a peaceful mission.

"What's that whippoorwill got on his mind?" whispered Speedy.

"Not any good for mankind," said Windy. "Watch him, pardner."

Jim Cravens came down and halted about thirty feet from the doorway. Speedy and Windy were cautious. This might be a scheme to get them out where Butch could work them over with a rifle from that window.

"All right, Cravens," said Windy, "What do you want?"

"I want Ed and Tommy."

"You'll be wantin' for a long time, Jim."

"Yea-a-ah? Mebbe not. Listen! Butch is up there with the sheriff and that lunkheaded detective. Butch is itchin' to kill both of 'em, and if I give him the signal, he shore will. You turn Ed and Tommy loose, all four of us will high-tail it out of here, and the sheriff and detective don't git hurt."

"Come further around, so we can see yuh, Jim," said Windy. "We ain't takin' no chance on Butch havin' a rifle up there."

Cravens obligingly came further along and stopped facing the middle of the doorway.

"You'd give him a signal, eh?" queried Windy.

"That's right, Windy. Turn them two boys over to me, or the sheriff dies."

Windy's gun covered Cravens.

"Keep yore hand's jist like they are, Jim!" Windy said. "Sheriff or no sheriff, you die if you don't obey. Right in the body, Jim. Or would yuh like to signal Butch—and die for it?"

Cravens realized that his bluff hadn't worked. He swallowed with difficulty.

"I'll tell Butch—"

"Tell him in jail," interrupted Speedy. "Come right in and join our party."

Cravens hesitated. He might take a chance. If a shot was fired, Butch would start shooting—but Jim Cravens wouldn't know it. Jim Cravens came on and into the stable. Life was sweet, even if his might be forfeit later. Speedy tied him with a lariat, and sat him down on the floor.

"You'll lose, anyway," said Cravens. "If I don't come back, he'll know yuh captured me, and he'll kill both of 'em before he pulls out. You better let me loose. I can handle him.

Windy grinned. "Wouldn't that be nice?"

Speedy peered around the corner of the doorway. He was anxious to know what Tombstone was doing.

"Butch'll kill 'em both," insisted Cravens. "I know Butch, and he's—"

From somewhere came the thud of a pistol shot. Speedy and Windy jumped to the doorway. The door of the house had been flung open, and out came Butch Neely, walking backwards, his right hand flung high, his six-shooter pointing straight up.

To their complete amazement, Butch went backwards off the top step, buckled forward, turned a complete somersault and ended up flat on his back off the porch. Tombstone peered around the corner, a gun gripped in his right hand, took a look at Butch, got up on the porch and stood there, looking toward the stable.

"How are yuh comin', pardner?" yelled Speedy.

"Well, purty good," drawled Tombstone. "Where-at is that other bee-ligerent?"

"We've got him tied up down here, Tombstone!"

"Well, that makes everythin' very good."

They went up to the house, where Tombstone was taking the ropes off Happy Holiday and Timothy McGrew. McGrew was still white.

"Ye came in time, my boy," he said. "That crazy brute was going to kill both of us. Whew! That's the closest call I ever had."

"Stick around here—we specialize in

'em," said Speedy.

"Listen!" said Windy. "Horses comin'! Look out!"

Four riders swept into the yard, pulling up short at sight of the man on the porch and the one sprawled in the yard.

"It's Brad Hess!" exclaimed the sheriff. "He must have heard—"

THE four men whirled their horses. Speedy, Tombstone, and Windy sprang out on the porch, their guns blasting a chorus of death at the four riders on their lunging horses, which were leaving the premises as fast as they could.

The lead horse went down in a lurching fall, throwing its rider, and the next horse crashed into it, going down in a smother of dust. Two riders, swinging low in their saddles, got away, separating, as they cleared the ranchhouse property.

The men ran out there. Brad Hess was knocked out, a shoulder broken, while Bill Keller, from the Blue Chip outfit, wailed over a broken leg.

"Windy, what is this all about?" the sheriff said. "Bing Heppner, dead on the porch, Brad Hess, busted up. Nobody told us anythin'—"

Brad Hess was trying to sit up, conscious, but suffering. He cursed them all and demanded a doctor.

"Hess, you'll git a doctor, when yuh tell the truth," Tombstone said. "Who shot Haley?"

Hess gritted his teeth agains the pain in his shoulder.

"Tex Evers," he whispered painfully. "Haley knew him. Tex didn't dare let Haley recognize him. But Haley shot, too—and Tex . . . maybe he's . . . dead . . . now."

"You fellers stole Blue Chip cows and shipped from Broken Fork, didn't yuh, Hess?"

"Yes," whispered Hess. "Get me a doctor."

"And Brad Heppner's brother, bein' a deputy over there, got his share for inspectin' the brands, eh?"

"Yes, blast yuh! Can't I have a doctor now?"

"That's all I wanted him to say," remarked Tombstone. "Yuh can turn Mortimer Aldrich loose, Happy. He didn't shoot nobody."

"That is the—well, it is wonderful," declared Timothy McGrew. "I congratulate you boys, even if it ends my job here. In fact, I don't want any more jobs like this. Life is too short—and mine was shortened twenty years this afternoon."

"Happy," said Windy, "over at the Double H are two dead men—Tex Evers and Dick Rose. Out there by the fence is Monk Mahley. Jim Cravens, Ed Wheeler and Tommy Lee are down at the stable, all tied up for shipment. I wonder what became of the depot agent."

"He's dead," said Bill Keller wearily. "The blasted fool fell off a runnin' horse, caught his foot in the stirrup, and drug to death. Maybe he drank too much whisky —I dunno."

"How on earth did you boys defeat all these desperate men?" said McGrew.

"Well," said Tombstone dryly, "mebbe it was the law of averages. Yuh know, you can only steal cows jist so long."

While West Fork folk listened in amazement to what the sheriff had to tell them, Speedy and Tombstone went over to the hotel, where Mrs. Green handed them a telegram.

"It came last night," she said grimly.

It was from Jim Keaton and read:

WAITE WIRES ME THAT HE HAS FIRST CLASS DETECTIVE TO HANDLE ENTIRE CASE. YOU WILL REPORT TO HIM ANY FINDINGS YOU HAVE REGARDING MURDER OF HALEY. DROP CASE AND WIRE CONFIRMATION.

Speedy read it aloud to Tombstone, who looked puzzled.

"What is a findin', Speedy?" he asked.

"I don't exactly know. I'll send him a answer. Have yuh got a telegraph blank, Mrs. Green?"

Mrs. Green had some. Speedy chewed the pencil thoughtfully, and finally wrote:

KILLER OF HALEY DEAD, GRAVEYARD AND JAIL FILLED WITH RUSTLERS AND DETECTIVE COVERED WITH GOOSE PIMPLES. DON'T BLAME US—YOUR TELEGRAM CAME TOO LATE.

"He hadn't ort to blame us," said Tombstone sadly. "We done the best we knowed how. We'd been all right, if we'd got that telegram yesterday."

"Yuh cain't please everybody," sighed Speedy. "Let's go eat—it's been a long time between meals."

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Next Issue: Tombstone and Speedy in GHOST OF THE TUMBLING K

Milt Melick held a double-barreled shotgun in his hands

SHOTGUN GADGET GAMBLE

By BEN FRANK

Rancher Andy Kretlow has a trick or two up his sleeve when a vengeful sidewinder becomes plumb dangerous!

RIGHT about the time Andy figured he ought to show Rose Lovell all the marvelous gadgets he'd built into the old Kretlow ranchhouse and, maybe, pop the question, Milt Melick escaped from prison. Hearing about Milt's escape, Andy felt a prickle of cold slide over him. If Milt ever came back to Aspen County, Andy reckoned it would be for just one reason. To pay him back for the trick he had played on Milt three years before.

Andy was a gadget maker and a fixer-upper. No matter what it was that needed fixing, the people of Trail End, the county seat of Aspen County, would say, "Leave it to Andy. He'll fix it."

By Andy they meant Andrew Percival Kretlow, who at ten, they said, took old man Kretlow's watch apart, lost some of the pieces, but put it together so it'd run, anyway. At fifteen he made a fiddle, decided it was too much trouble to learn to play it, so

made a mechanical contraption to play it for him.

At twenty-one, he was still loafing around Trail End, doing odd jobs and making fool gadgets for the kids to play with. People allowed then that he would never settle down, or amount to shucks.

But at twenty-two, he took one look at the new schoolmarm, Rose Lovell, when she was standing in the sun with her hair shining like burnished copper, and made up his mind it was time to start amounting to something. And that same day, he saddled his knock-kneed hammerhead and rode out to Cold Creek and the rundown ranch that his old man had left him when he died.

"A right fair ranch," Andy said later, grinning on one side of his wide mouth and cleaning his fingernails with his prize possession, a knife with four blades, a screwdriver, a punch, a can opener, and a drill bit. "Reckon I'll fix up the old house, run a herd of white-faces on t'other side of the creek, and do a little irrigatin' for alfalfa and corn."

People listened and grinned at each other. Everybody figured Andy was about one-third crazy and the other two-thirds lazy, even though he could fix any contraption that went haywire. And as for looks, he wasn't much, either. A medium-sized man, never packed a gun—in fact, never had shot one that anyone knew about. He never could remember where he left his hat, and was always making something with that complicated knife.

NOBODY had ever seen him angry.

"Reckon yuh could knock him down and kick in his teeth, and he'd get up grinnin'," they said.

But nobody had tried it to find out for sure, maybe because of those steady gray eyes set wide in his homely face.

Rose Lovell, even if she was as pretty as a store calendar and a schoolmarm to boot, had to take a certain amount of kidding about her future home on Cold Creek.

She tossed her coppery head and laughed good-naturedly about the whole business.

"A girl has to be courted and asked before she can make up her mind," she said. "So far, 'howdy' and 'a right nice day today' are all I've had from Andy."

But if anyone had taken the trouble to look beneath the twinkle in her sky-blue eyes, they would have seen a steady deep glow that could mean only one thing.

Right off, Andy dammed Cold Creek for irrigation and for turning a water-wheel to do his work, like sawing out lumber and grinding feed and running the machinery in his shop. The first thing people knew, the old house had a new coat of paint, and a herd of white-faces were getting fat on the lush grass on the far side of the creek.

After that, Trail End saw little of Andy. Clocks stopped and various mechanical contraptions broke down, and people rode out to Cold Creek to get Andy to do some fixing. Andy, they discovered, was through fixing for other people.

"Riggin' up a sprinkler system," he would say, pawing out his trick knife. "Yuh push this here lever and yuh get a shower of water all around the outside of the house. That's so flowers'll grow all summer long."

So it went, month after month—and then Milt Melick bashed a guard over the head and made his escape.

It had been Andy's doing that had put Milt behind bars in the first place. Three years back, somebody had killed old Ike Thomas for his little hoard of hard-earned money that he kept in a belt about his scrawny middle. Most people, including Sheriff Malloy, suspected Milt, but there was no proof. Andy had furnished the proof. Andy, with one of his gadgets—a lie detector of his own invention.

"Yuh fasten these wires and straps around a feller's wrists and neck," he had explained to a packed courtroom. "These wires are fastened to a lot of jiggers inside this box. There ain't time to tell yuh exactly how it works, but if a feller's lyin', a red card shows in this little winder in the box. If he's tellin' the truth, a white card shows."

They tried the machine out on the sheriff and two or three others. The accuracy of those flashing red and white cards made everybody gasp. Milt Melick, squirming nervously in the prisoner's box, began to get a little white around the mouth. He kept his pale eyes fastened on Andy, watching for some trick.

But Andy didn't go near the lie detector. In fact, he didn't pay much attention to what was going on. It was just as if he knew it would work, that it couldn't miss, so why worry?

When it came Milt's turn to get himself into the tangle of wires and straps, he had suddenly turned panicky.

"Yuh ain't goin' to trap me thataway!" he had panted. "Let me out of here!"

He had freed himself from his guards and rushed for the door. Sheriff Malloy stopped him by sticking a long leg in front of the plunging man. Milt measured his long length on the floor and began to blubber and talk.

The first thing they knew, he had confessed.

People said they reckoned Andy really had something in his lie detector and would be a rich and famous man some day. Andy had just grinned and looked embarrassed as he cleaned his finger nails with his big knife.

"I kind of liked old man Thomas," he had explained. "It made me sore when somebody killed him for that money he'd worked hard all his life for. So I rigged up that contraption and run a couple of real fine black silk threads along the floor from it to where old Granny Stevens set. She's knowed everybody around here and all about 'em ever since they was born. So when somebody answered somethin' wrong, she pulled the thread fastened to the red card. If they answered right, she pulled the other one. I figgered Milt might lose his head when his turn come."

WHEN Milt heard that it had all been a trick, he went stark raving crazy mad. He said that if he ever got out of jail, which wasn't likely since he had been sentenced for life, he would try a trick or two on Andrew Percival Kretlow. And now, Milt was on the loose.

Andy, remembering all this the day after he heard of Milt's escape, shuddered slightly, although he reckoned Milt wouldn't risk returning to Aspen County. It was getting along toward late afternoon, and Andy felt like he could drink a good quart of the milk that he had stored in a cooler contraption he had rigged up in the kitchen, piping the cool water of Cold Creek through it.

He went up to the front door of his gleaming white house, pushed a secret button in the door casing. The door opened. He went in, and the door automatically closed.

He wasn't any match in gun speed or strength for Milt Melick, and he knew it. Besides he didn't even own a gun. Standing there in the front room, he thought some of making a gadget to do his fighting for him, but he reckoned there wouldn't be time for that. If Milt came after him at all, it would be soon.

He studied himself in the full-length mirror that he had built into the front room wall, facing the oak stairsteps. For size, he wasn't much. Wiry and quick, but certainly not built for a rough-and-tumble fight with Milt Melick.

He shivered again, not that he was exactly afraid, but he wasn't ready to die, because there were so many gadgets yet to make. And there was Rose Lovell. He hadn't got around to popping the question yet. It seemed that everytime he started to suggest that maybe she would like to become Mrs. Andrew Percival Kretlow, he got all sweaty, and his throat filled with gravel.

But thinking of Rose was much nicer than worrying about Milt, so he thought of her. Blue eyes, copper hair, nice teeth— He forgot all about the cold milk.

He shoved open a hidden panel in the wall, stepped into a small elevator which was propelled by water power, and rode up to the second floor of the house. He went into a room which he had rigged up with mirrors in such a way that he could see into every room on the lower floor.

His mind shoved back to Milt, and lines of worry sobered his homely face. If Milt carried out his threats, he guessed all his work on the house and its labor-saving devices, like the dishwasher and the spud peeler would be wasted.

A banging at the front door jerked him out of his chair. He opened a small panel in the wall, exposing a hidden mirror. This mirror was so arranged with other mirrors that he could see the entire front porch of the house. A sigh of relief escaped him. Sheriff Malloy was at the door, not Milt Melick.

Andy put a speaking tube to his lips.

"Be with yuh in a second, Sheriff," he said.

Malloy jumped and looked around for the source of the voice.

Grinning, Andy headed for the stairs, straddled the slick oak bannister and slid down to the front room, a method of descent which was less dignified than the elevator or steps, but much faster.

When he opened the door, the sheriff stared at him unbelievingly.

"I'd a swore I heard yuh right out here," Malloy said.

Andy showed him a grille in the porch ceiling and explained about the speaking tubes.

"I can hear through 'em as well as talk through 'em," he finished.

"I'll be a cross-eyed owl!" Malloy exploded. "What'll yuh rig up next!" Then he got down to business. "Look, Andy," he said soberly, "they ain't caught Milt yet. I figger Milt will hightail out of the country as fast as he can go. But just in case he don't—Andy, have you got a gun?"

Andy shook his head and squared his shoulders.

"Reckon I won't need a gun."

The sheriff looked doubtful.

"Yuh ain't forgot what Milt said he'd do if he ever got a chance?"

ANDY put a grin on his face and hoped it looked better than the way he felt inside. He guessed Rose wouldn't care much for any fellow who acted scared of a danger as remote as Milt's returning to Aspen County.

"I ain't forgot," he said. "But like yuh say, Milt won't risk comin' back."

"Milt would be a fool to come back where people know him." Malloy nodded. "But yuh can't always tell how a mind like Milt's will work. I was just ridin' by and thought I'd stop and kind of put yuh on yore guard."

"Much obliged," Andy said. "I'll keep my eyes open."

And, watching the sheriff ride away, he somehow felt better. Malloy was a good man and kept the weeds out of his county. Besides, when you got right down to it, Milt would be a fool to come back where everyone knew him. And Milt wasn't exactly a fool, even if he had let a trick box with a little window in it get his goat.

Bareheaded—he'd lost his hat some place in the house—Andy went back to his workshop and started to smooth down a walnut board that he expected to become part of a table top. In a couple of minutes, he was so busy that he forgot about the sheriff and Milt. The sanded wood had a sweet smell in it, and the grain was bright and straight. His lips puckered, and he whistled "Old Zip Coon" as he worked. The feel of good wood under his sensitive fingers always made him whistle.

The clatter of hoofs jerked him around to the door of his shop, and what he saw made his lean jaw sag. Rose Lovell, hair flying, face white, had ridden up on a paint pony bearing the Star brand. That meant she had borrowed the horse from little Eddie Star, one of the school kids. But why?

That was as far as he got in his thinking before she saw him.

"Andy, Milt's back!" she cried.

He stared at her, understanding her and yet not quite grasping the significance of her words. Afterward, he guessed the reason he hadn't felt any fear was because he was thinking how pretty she was standing there with the warm sun tangling in her hair and her soft lips parted just enough to show her even white teeth.

"Right after school," Rose hurried on, "I overheard Jimmy Melick tell another boy that his Uncle Milt came to his home at noon. He said his uncle was taking a nap this afternoon, but when he got rested, he was going to fix Andy Kretlow! Andy, I didn't know what to do. I borrowed this horse and came right out, because—"

She stopped, and her face colored up some.

Andy still felt no fear. All he could think of was that Rose was afraid for him. Maybe now was the time to show her how he had fixed up the old house. Maybe, if he could keep the gravel out of his throat, he'd pop the question.

He saw Rose staring her eyes wide open. She screamed and put her hand to her throat. That scream ran along Andy's nerves like a file against steel. He turned slowly, guessing what he would see. His guess was right. Milt Melick had stepped out from behind Andy's sawmill, and he held a double-barreled shotgun in his big hands.

"I was goin' to wait till dark to do this job," Milt said, grinning, and showing his long yellow teeth, "but now I reckon it can't wait that long."

Milt slouched forward a few steps. Andy guessed that the big killer wore a pair of his brother's overalls, since they were about four sizes too small for him. In three years of prison life, Milt's flat, ugly face had become a muddy gray in color, but his pale eyes hadn't changed. Killer's eyes, they had been when he had gone to prison, and killer's eyes there were now. And running over with an insane hate.

"Heard you and the sheriff talkin' a while ago," he went on. "So yuh thought I wouldn't come back! Guess yuh don't know how it is to be shut up for three years. How yuh keep plannin' for the day when yuh can get back at the jasper what put yuh behind bars by trickin' yuh!"

Andy could feel the cold clammy sweat working through the pores of his skin. He was scared. So scared that his knees threatened to give way. But not for himself. He shot a glance at Rose's white face. She had come here to warn him and had stepped into a death trap. It was for her that he felt fear.

He swallowed his rising panic.

"She didn't have nothin' to do with sendin' yuh up," he said hoarsely. "I reckon yuh'll let her go."

"I reckon I won't!" Milt snarled. "She's the schoolmarm yuh're sweet on. Hate to see her hurt, wouldn't yuh, trickster?"

"Don't worry about me, Andy," Rose said.

THAT struck Milt as funny. He threw back his big head and roared. Andy took a step toward him, and the man leveled the shotgun and sobered instantly.

"Yuh're close enough, trickster!" he grated.

Andy halted.

Milt's glittering eyes narrowed. "Guess

we'll all go into the house," he said. "Got a idea that when people find you and yore girl in there together, there'll be a lot of lifted eyebrows and considerable speculation. How come, people will wonder, was she out there with that Andy Kretlow? Didn't think she was that kind."

Hot anger filled Andy. He balled his fists and forgot the lifted shotgun.

"Yuh can't do that to Rose!" he cried, advancing. "Yuh can't!"

He felt something against his chest. It was the muzzle of the shotgun. That stopped his advance, but it didn't stop his boiling anger. Or the beginning of a plan.

He let his shoulders drop and his fists unroll. He jerked back from the shotgun like a steer from a branding iron.

"I reckon yuh can," he said hollowly. "I reckon yuh can do anything yuh want to with us."

"Ain't no doubt about it." Milt grinned. He jutted his muddy-gray chin toward the house. "March!"

Andy and Rose walked along the path side by side. Behind them, Andy could hear Milt's big feet clomping against the stone walk. Inside his wiry body, his heart hammered like a pile-driver. He was remembering the gadgets in his house, thinking that Rose would see his handiwork for the first time and, if things didn't work out right, it would be the last time.

He and the girl stepped up on the front porch. His knee brushed a lever set beside the porch post, shoved it forward. A hissing sound followed, and water showered all about the house, soaking Milt, who was just climbing the steps.

Milt leaped up on the porch.

"Rainin', and not a cloud in the sky!" he bellowed. "How'n tarnation—"

"That's my flower sprinklin' system," Andy explained. "Somethin' must've busted loose."

Milt shivered.

"Coldest danged water I ever felt!"

Andy had pushed the secret button in the door casing. The door whipped open.

"What do yuh know—" the killer began.

Andy shoved Rose inside, hoping to get the door shut before Milt had a chance to follow. Rose stumbled on the door sill, slowing up their entrance. The door shut, and the spring lock clicked—but Milt was inside the house with Andy and Rose.

"Works automatically," Andy said, keeping his disappointment down.

Rose, he saw, was staring about the big front room, taking in the large mirror, the shiny oak stairs, the gleaming home-made furniture, the paneled wall on the left.

"Lovely!" she breathed.

"Look good, sister," Milt sneered, "for yuh ain't goin' to live long enough for a second look!"

Andy had backed against the paneled wall, his fingers feeling for the hidden button that opened the elevator door.

"That mirror," he said, "come clear from Kansas City. Ain't another one like it in five hundred miles. In it yuh can see yoreself as plain as day. No flaws. No distortions."

Milt faced the mirror, and Andy's fingers pressed the button. The door slid open behind him, soundlessly.

Milt grinned at himself in the mirror, squared his big shoulders, pulled in his sagging stomach.

"In a good store suit, I wouldn't look so bad," he said glancing narrowly at the girl. "Mebbe even schoolmarms might fall for me if I was dressed up some."

Rose shuddered, and Andy sidled into the elevator. The panel slid back in place without a sound.

"Yuh know," he heard Milt say, "the girls used to think I was right hand— Hey, where'd that trickster go?"

Andy shot the elevator to the second floor, stepped out and ran into the small room with its sets of mirrors and speaking tubes. He glanced into one of the mirrors and saw Milt looking frantically about the front room. Rose, her lips parted, stood staring unbelievingly at the place where Andy had stood a moment before.

"Where'd he go?" he heard Milt roar at the girl.

"I don't know," she answered faintly. "He didn't go up the stairs and he didn't go out the door. He—he just vanished."

ANDY picked up the speaking tube that led to the kitchen.

"I'm in the kitchen, Milt," he said. "I got a butcher knife in each hand. Come and get me!"

"I'll get yuh!" Milt bellowed, and lunged toward the kitchen door.

Then a crafty look came to his flat, ugly face, and he turned back for the girl.

"Come along, sister," he said. "I ain't leavin' yuh in here alone. As long as I got you, I reckon that lowdown trick-playin' skunk won't go far away."

Andy felt a little sick. He had hoped that Milt would leave Rose alone in the front room long enough for him to get her into the elevator. Once both of them were out of

Milt's sight, they would have a chance to get away.

He glanced through another mirror into the kitchen. Milt was staring about, his gun leveled and ready for business.

"Got scared and run out on me, huh?" Milt rasped.

Rose was looking about the white kitchen, her eyes as large as saucers. She didn't miss a thing—the big water-cooled refrigerator, the dishwasher, the dumb-waiter which would carry an entire meal into the dining room at one time.

"Wonderful!" she mumured.

At any other time, a word of praise from her would have made Andy blush like a school girl, but now his face was clammy as he picked up the speaking tube that led to the front room. Maybe, he thought, he could get Milt to rush back into the big room and leave Rose alone in the kitchen. If he did that, Rose could escape through the back door.

"I'm back in the front room now, yuh big lummox!" he called.

Milt's face turned a mottled purple. For a moment, he forgot the girl as he started for the door, and Andy's hopes soared. But at the door, Milt turned and motioned the girl to go ahead of him.

"I ain't losin' sight of yuh, sister," he gritted.

Andy looked into the front room again and saw Rose, her face bloodless, walk in ahead of the killer. Milt's glittering, narrowed eyes roved about slowly. He was thinking now, Andy knew. Thinking that in someway he was being tricked, and realizing that, he was becoming cautious and more dangerous than ever.

Andy lifted the speaking tube that led to the grille above the front porch. If he could get Milt to open the front door and step outside, leaving Rose inside, the automatic door with its spring lock would shut the big man out away from the girl.

"I'm out here on the front porch!" he called. "Why don't yuh come and get me, Milt? Or are yuh scared?"

Milt's big head jerked around toward the sound of that taunting voice. He started toward the door, but stopped halfway across the big room.

"All right, trickster!" he called, his voice scraping like a saw over a nail. "Yore fun's over!"

He lifted the gun and pointed it at Rose's white face.

"I don't know how yuh're gettin' around like yuh are," he went on, "but I do know yuh're goin' to walk right back into this room, or be plumb sorry! I'm goin' to count to ten. If yuh ain't back here by then, I'm goin' to blast the legs out from under this girl. Yuh wouldn't want her hurt like that, would yuh? One—two—three—"

Andy fought at the weakness that swept over him. This was the end of all hope. He had to go down into that room before Milt counted to ten. He couldn't let the killer torture Rose by shooting her in the legs. Better that they both be killed quickly and as painlessly as possible.

"Five!" he heard Milt say.

He started for the door and was half-way through it before he remembered the big mirror that faced the oak staircase. That mirror was on the same side of the room as the front door. Three years ago, Milt had been thrown off his guard and trapped. Maybe the big killer could be fooled again.

Andy caught his breath sharply and wheeled back into the room.

"Seven!" Milt's voice rasped through the speaking tube.

Andy caught up the front porch speaking tube and held it to his gray lips.

"All right, Milt," he said harshly. "I'm comin' in, and yuh'd better be ready for me, for I'm comin' like a bat out of Hades!"

IN THE small mirror, he saw Milt's shoulder muscles bunch under the thin cotton shirt, saw the big man turn his gun from the girl and level it at the front door.

"Get to comin'!" Milt barked. "Eight!"

Andy slid through the door of the small room, leaped astraddle the slick oak bannister and gave himself a forward shove. He felt the wood turn hot under the seat of his blue denim work pants. He let out an ear-splitting screech as he shot forward.

Milt faced the front door, his broad back to the stairs. He expected Andy to come charging through that trick front door. Andy's war-whoop completely filled the room, and Milt hadn't the slightest idea from where the spine-chilling cry was coming.

There wasn't time for him to reason things out. There wasn't time enough for anything except to lift his eyes from the door to the huge plate-glass mirror. And what he saw in that mirror was Andy Kretlow shooting toward him out of thin air like a runaway express train.

That reflection was too much like the real thing for Milt. In fact, he forgot he was facing a mirror. He forgot everything except that hurtling hundred and forty pounds of fury. He slapped his gun to his shoulder and

emptied both barrels into the mirror. Right on top of the blast and the crash of glass, Andy landed against the big man's back.

Milt went down like a dynamited brick wall, the breath driving out of him in one painful gasp. But he wasn't down for keeps. He got back some breath and shook Andy off his back like a dog shakes off water.

Andy beat Milt to his feet and came in low, driving his fists against the big man's middle. Milt, still fighting for breath, shaking the fog out of his big ugly head, gave ground, but he didn't go down a second time. He got squared around, put his weight behind his right fist and let Andy have it.

The blow caught Andy in the mouth. It smashed his lips into pulp against his teeth. It snapped his head back, lifted him off the floor. He went down, sliding, came up against the paneled wall with a solid, body-wracking thump.

For a horrible moment, a black film slid across his vision, but his fingers wrapped about something cold and smooth. The barrel of the shotgun.

He fought at the salt taste in his mouth, the sickness that twisted at his stomach. He lunged to his feet, swayed drunkenly.

Rose screamed. It was that scream, reminding him that he was fighting not for himself but for her, that gave him the will to lift the gun and shake the sweat and blood and blindness from his eyes.

Milt rolled forward, eyes burning, teeth bared, his thick long arms bent forward at the elbows. Andy lashed out with the empty gun, clubbing at the big ugly head.

The killer lifted his arms to ward off the blow, but he was only partially successful. The gun stock cracked against his skull. His knees sagged, and a groan slid from between his clenched, yellow teeth. Andy hit him again. And once more, putting the last ounce of his strength into that blow.

Milt's eyes glazed over, and he settled to the floor like an empty grain sack, grinding the broken glass of the mirror under his huge bulk. He didn't move. He wouldn't move, Andy knew, for a long, long time.

Then, through a haze of exhaustion, he saw Rose standing there, her blue eyes fixed on his face. The starry look in those blue eyes was something to see. It got into Andy's head and made him dizzier than he already was.

And, suddenly realizing there wasn't any gravel in his throat, he reckoned now was the time to pop the question, even if he had just finished the fight of his life and felt as if he had been pulled through a knot-hole backward.

"Rose—" he began.

But before he could get out another word, the gravel came up into his throat thicker than burrs in a wild long-horn's tail.

But he didn't need to get out another word, for Rose was in his arms, her coppery hair soft against his cheek, and he knew she understood exactly what he had intended to say.

So he didn't say another word. He just stood there, grinning with his battered lips and thinking that some day he would likely have to make a cradle with a gadget on it so all you had to do was to wind it up, and it would rock until the baby went to sleep.

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LONGRIDER GUN-LAW

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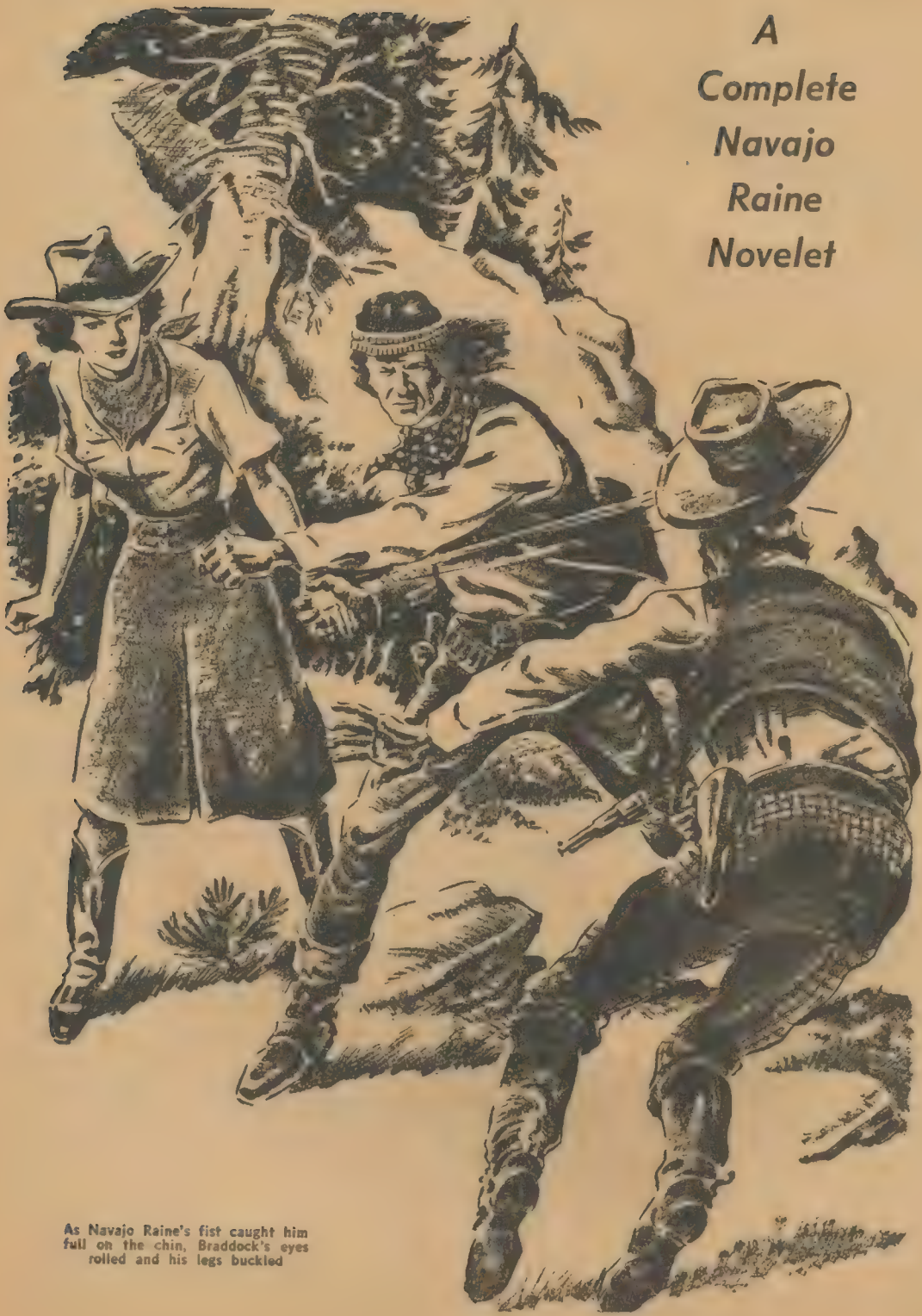


As Navajo Raine's fist caught him full on the chin, Braddock's eyes rolled and his legs buckled

RANGERS RIDE ALONE

By JACKSON COLE

Confronted by a cold-blooded slayer, the Arizona Ranger solves a triple crime, saves Bud Shaw from a hangnoose, and metes out grim gunsmoke justice to evil renegades!

CHAPTER I

Death In A Mine

THE WIND made little whispering sounds among the crevices along the dun bluff, that were like muted requiem to the ears of Navajo Tom Raine, Arizona Territorial Ranger. Raine stood motionless, his dark, hawkish face expressionless. But as he looked at the two men before him, he realized that he stood only a finger's twitch from violent death.

He knew the two men who faced him very slightly—big, ribby Sam Braddock and burly, red-necked Bud Shaw. Sam Braddock stood with bony hands clenched, staring at the ranger.

Big Bud Shaw was crouched forward, a Winchester carbine nestled against one shoulder. The carbine hammer was at full cock, the gun centered on Navajo Raine's chest.

Raine felt his throat going dry and tight, felt the hot breath of the desert wind that touched his face, tugging gently at the heavy black hair he wore, Navajo Indian fashion, just short of touching the tops of his broad shoulders. His supple hands hung unmoving near the turquoise grips of matched six-shooters

that rode his lean thighs.

Navajo Raine had been given no faintest hint that he was walking into trouble. From the rimrock above, he had spotted the windlass-rigged prospect hole, worked his way down the bluffs, and had stepped around a shoulder of stone to find himself peering into the wrong end of a cocked rifle.

"Who the devil are you, feller?" Bud Shaw's voice was hoarse, raw-edged with strain.

"Put that rifle down, yuh ox-brained fool!" Sam Braddock barked savagely at Bud Shaw. "This long-haired galoot is Navajo Tom Raine, Arizona ranger. Want to get yoreself in more trouble with the law than yuh already are?"

All the fire left Bud Shaw's bloodshot eyes. He lowered the rifle, let the gun hammer down, then leaned the carbine against a boulder.

Bud Shaw's eyes shuttled from Raine to Sam Braddock.

"I ain't never got into trouble over usin' a gun, Sam," he protested.

"No?" Braddock echoed. With a mocking grin he looked significantly towards the windlass-rigged prospect hole.

"Say, now!" Bud Shaw gulped. "You hintin' that I beefed old Jerry Cotter, Sam?"

"What's this about s o m e o n e bein' beefed?" Navajo Tom Raine asked sharply.

"We'll get around to Jerry Cotter and what happened to him a little later, Raine," Braddock said. "Right now I want to know why you come snoopin' around this claim Cotter was workin'."

NAVAJO RAINE'S face remained expressionless, but inwardly he felt a sharp stab of resentment at Braddock's arrogance.

Braddock, who was a prosperous, well dressed merchant trader, was obviously ready for trouble. A gun-weighted holster peeped from beneath the tail of his expensive broadcloth coat on the right side. He had the arrogant manner of a man accustomed to having his way with others.

"Why I showed up here at Jerry Cotter's claim this mornin' is no affair of yores," Raine said. "But if somethin' has happened to Cotter, yuh'd better start explainin'."

"Take a look down that shaft yonder," Braddock said, angered at Raine's tone.

Raine turned away, halted beside the shaft, and leaned over, resting his hand on the windlass drum. The ranger's breath sucked in suddenly, and his green eyes narrowed as he stared down.

The shaft was not deep—sixteen or eighteen feet, Raine judged. Huddled on the blast-torn stones at the bottom of the shaft lay the body of a small, grizzled man, with a blood-caked, yawning hole in his bared chest.

"He was shot in the back," Sam Braddock said drily at Raine's side. "The bullet went in between his shoulder blades. The little hole the bullet made goin' in and the way it ripped Cotter's chest open comin' out adds up to a thirty-thirty rifle."

"How do you know so much about the wound," Raine snapped, turning on Braddock.

The thin merchant-trader's tawny eyes mocked the ranger.

"I was down there a while ago," he said quietly. "Bud, there, come larrupin' into Agua Dulce about an hour back, claimin' he had found Jerry Cotter dead here in this hole. From last accounts, Bud was supposed to be working here, hoisting up the rock old Jerry Cotter shoveled into that battered ore bucket, there."

"Sam, yuh're makin' this sound bad for me," Bud Shaw said heavily.

Raine thought so, too, but did not say so.

"Braddock, yuh've never done me anything but dirt," Bud Shaw began thickly. "If it wasn't for the way Helen feels towards you, I'd—"

"Hold on, Bud!" Raine interrupted sharply. "Braddock's gab doesn't amount to anything. Cool down, and set me straight."

"Sure, Bud, set the ranger straight!" Braddock jeered. "Tell him that cock-and-bull tale you told me about old Jerry Cotter givin' you the day off yesterday. Tell how you rode to Bat Zinn's place and guzzled so much moonshine whisky yuh don't know for shore what yuh done."

"Jerry Cotter did give me the day off yesterday, Raine," Bud Shaw said heavily. "He hurt his back early in the mornin', and said he'd have to lay off work until the pain let up. He told me to chase out into the hills and fetch in a deer for camp meat."

"But yuh headed for Zinn's place, and filled yore hide full of bust-head whisky," Sam Braddock added. "You don't re-

member anything. Now, lying at the bottom of this shaft is a man yuh hated like poison."

Raine's attention sharpened instantly. He saw big Bud Shaw turn pale, and caught the look of fear in his bloodshot eyes.

"You and Jerry Cotter didn't hit it off very well?" the ranger asked pointedly.

"Nobody could get along with that cantankerous old devil!" Bud Shaw declared.

"Then why were yuh workin' for him?"

"Braddock and Helen made me take the job."

"That's the second time you've mentioned Helen," Raine said. "Mind tellin' me who she is?"

"Helen is my sister." Bud Shaw scowled. "Why drag her name into this mess, Raine."

"Not only Helen's name, but Helen herself is gettin' into this mixup, Bud," Sam Braddock said thinly. "Take a look down yonder."

BOTH Navajo Tom Raine and Bud Shaw turned. Two riders were just starting up the slope, one of them a slender girl who wore a green blouse, divided buckskin riding skirt and a cream-colored Stetson. Beside the girl rode one of the biggest, fattest men Navajo Raine had ever seen.

"I thought it took yuh a long time to get here after I rode into town this mornin'!" Bud Shaw glared at Sam Braddock. "Yuh sneaked up to the house and told Helen, didn't yuh?"

"Helen had to know about it sooner or later," Braddock countered. "And besides, yuh'd better be worryin' about what Ott Noland will do when he gets here, hadn't yuh?"

"Ott Noland?" Raine echoed. "He's the local sheriff, isn't he, Bud?"

"Shore, Ott Noland's the sheriff." Big Bud Shaw nodded grimly. "I didn't kill Jerry Cotter, Raine. But Ott Noland will claim I did, and I mebbe can't prove I didn't. So I ain't lettin' Ott Noland arrest me!"

There was a cocked six-shooter in Bud Shaw's big fist when he quit speaking. Watching Navajo Tom Raine and Sam Braddock narrowly, he began backing away. At maybe his third step, a bullet hit him.

Raine heard the slap of the slug, saw Bud Shaw's dusty Stetson topple off his head, and saw blood spurt down the left side of Shaw's face before the whiplike sound of a rifle came up the long slope. Bud Shaw dropped flat with a sodden sound, and Raine looked down the slope as Helen Shaw's voice lifted in a thin cry.

CHAPTER II

Navajo Raine's Warning

SMOKE was still drifting from the sheriff's rifle when Helen Shaw went after him with her quirt. She was small compared to Sheriff Ott yet she was giving that big, blubbery-fat badge-polisher a batch of trouble. The girl was spurring her sorrel close to the sheriff's dun. Her quirt cracked loudly whenever it landed. The sheriff was ducking and swearing hoarsely, trying to ward off the blows.

Navajo Raine at once began to race down the slope. After him, came Sam Braddock, yelling loudly. The ranger was still fifty yards away from the girl when Sheriff Ott Noland threw away the rifle he had been trying to use as a shield and seized the quirt that had been welting his back and arms.

Raine and Sam Braddock both yelled at the girl to let the quirt go, but the strap was looped fast over her wrist. The sheriff howled in angry delight and gave a mighty yank on the quirt, peeling her out of the saddle. She landed on her feet, tripped, but was up again instantly, minus her Stetson and looking like a lovely fury as she tore at a gun in a holster at her slim waist. Raine plunged to her side just as the stubby, heavy caliber six-shooter slid out of leather.

"Whoa, now!" the ranger admonished, and seized her wrist. She whirled on him, but the ranger wrapped his long arms around her and held her tightly.

"Easy, now!" he warned.

Raine saw a startled face tilt up towards him. She had short curly black hair and stormy dark gray eyes.

"You're Navajo Tom Raine, the ranger!" she said suddenly, in a low-toned, slightly husky voice.

He nodded and replied. "I'm Raine. Behave if I let you go?"

"Take this gun quick," Helen Shaw said. "I'll use it on Ott Noland if I keep it. He murdered my brother in cold blood."

Raine released her and took the gun. Braddock and the big, lumpy sheriff were holding a private confab several rods away. Helen Shaw stepped back, straightening her blouse and fixing her hair.

At sight of the girl, free again, Sheriff Noland snapped erect, sent her an ugly scowl, and rode on up the slope.

"Bud's dead, isn't he?" Helen Shaw asked Navajo Raine.

"I don't know, Helen," he told her gravely. "Noland's bullet hit your brother's head, so—Hey, look!"

Raine's voice lifted in excitement, for Bud Shaw was sitting up slowly, holding a hand to his wounded head. Helen Shaw sighed with relief, then uttered a cry of fear.

"Stop Ott Noland!" she wailed.

Raine knew what Helen Shaw meant. The huge sheriff had halted his horse beside Bud Shaw, and he dismounted.

"Come on!" Raine said, and began racing up the slope.

HELEN SHAW uttered a whimper of disappointment at being left behind, so Raine reached back and seized one of her hands. He sprinted again, and heard the girl's cry of surprise as he literally hurtled up the slope with her.

The ranger's boot heels skidded a little, a moment later, and he halted so suddenly Helen Shaw bumped into him.

"Stand back, you two!" Sheriff Ott Noland rumbled.

Raine ignored the sheriff. He was looking down at Bud Shaw, who was feeling a bleeding gash just above one ear. Bud Shaw evidently had his wits about him, for he smiled sourly up at the ranger.

Helen tried to jerk free to go to her brother, but the ranger tightened his grip as he watched the huge sheriff, who had made an ugly sound deep in his fat throat.

"You better hand onto that little spitfire, Raine!" the sheriff declared.

"So you know me, eh?" Raine asked slowly.

"I know all about you!" the sheriff said. "Yore daddy, Marshal Powder Raine, was bushwhacked durin' the Tonto Basin war. You was only a little shaver then, and yuh run off to the mountains and growed up with the Navajo Injuns. You ain't even half civilized."

"Sheriff, I don't think you like me," Raine said drily.

Noland glared. "I don't! You're one of them fancy-pants Arizona rangers Burt Mossman has organized. Don't let me ketch you tryin' to stir up trouble in my bailiwick!"

"Noland, the rangers try to cooperate with other peace officers," Raine said evenly. "But we take orders from no one except Captain Burt Mossman."

"Yuh'll take orders from me, and my orders is for you to be out of my territory by sundown today, Raine!" the sheriff almost yelled in his rage.

"Sorry, Noland, but I can't take yore orders," Raine said patiently.

"So yuh did come in here to do some snoopin', did yuh?" Sam Braddock asked harshly.

Braddock's face was white and set as he looked at Raine and Helen Shaw.

"Let go of her hand, Raine!" he said through locked teeth.

"Helen, do you want me to let go of your hand?" Raine asked the girl.

Helen Shaw smiled sweetly up into the ranger's face.

"I love to have you hold my hand."

Sam Braddock leaped forward, tugging at his six-shooter.

"I'll pistol whip this green eyed son, you little flirt!" Braddock raged.

Raine did not let go of her hand. But he did a quick half-turn, and his free left fist whizzed out.

Sam Braddock came to a dead stop when Raine's fist caught him full on the chin. The merchant-trader's eyes rolled back, his long legs buckled, and he pitched down on his face.

"Tally one!" Bud Shaw whooped.

But Navajo Raine's troubles were just beginning. With a throaty bellow of anger, Sheriff Ott Noland lurched towards him, six-shooter lifting for a slapping blow.

Raine let go of Helen Shaw's hand, stuck a foot behind the sheriff's run-over boot heels, and slammed the palm of his right hand hard against Noland's treble chins.

The sheriff sat down hard. Raine's right foot lashed out, and the six-shooter went spinning out of Noland's loosened grip.

"Tally two!" Bud Shaw yelped. "Better bend a gun over his head."

"You're under arrest, yuh long-haired whelp!" Noland said at last.

"What charge, sheriff?" Raine asked.

"Assaultin' me and Mr. Braddock!" Noland fumed.

RAINE glanced at Sam Braddock, who was still out cold. When he looked back into the sheriff's contorted face his gaze was sober.

"Bud and Helen Shaw will testify that I acted in self defense," he said sharply. "So let's quit horsin' around, Noland, and get down to the business of findin' out who murdered old Jerry Cotter."

"Are you crazy?" the sheriff bellowed angrily. "Bud Shaw kilt old Jerry Cotter, and I'm jailin' Bud just as fast as I can get him to town."

The sheriff got to his feet and hauled out a pair of handcuffs.

Helen had knotted a bandanna around her brother's bullet-gashed head and wiped away the blood from his face.

"Forget the bracelets, Ott," Bud Shaw said wearily. "Now that I'm under arrest, I've got better sense than tryin' to escape."

The sheriff sneered. "The charge is murder, and you're goin' to town handcuffed."

"And yuh'll wind up charged with false arrest and mebbe a few more things a smart lawyer can think up, Noland," Navajo Raine said.

Sheriff Noland whirled on Raine instantly, goggle-eyed from surprise.

"What in thunderation are you talkin' about?" he wanted to know.

Sam Braddock's acid voice bit through the silence.

"He's bluffin', you lummox!"

Braddock was on his feet now, still a little wabbly.

"Handcuff Bud Shaw and let's get started for town, Ott!" Braddock ordered the sheriff. The sheriff shuffled his huge feet nervously, glancing from Raine to Sam Braddock.

"What makes you think I'll get into trouble if I charge Bud Shaw with murderin' Jerry Cotter?" the sheriff asked Raine.

"I know a man who will testify in Bud Shaw's defense," Raine said slowly. "And that man's testimony will prove beyond any shadow of doubt that Bud positively could not have murdered Jerry Cotter."

Bud and Helen Shaw gaped at Raine in amazement.

"I still think yuh're bluffin', Raine!" Sam Braddock snarled. "But in case you can produce this witness, I'll take pleasure out of stampin' the meddlin' whelp into the ground!"

"Then start stampin', Braddock!" Raine said coldly. "I happen to be the gent who knows that Bud Shaw could not have killed Jerry Cotter."

CHAPTER III

Tightening Coils

NAVAJO TOM RAINE was breathing hard, a few minutes later, when he pulled himself over the last narrow ledge and stood on the rimrock. He faced about and looked down upon the rocky bench where old Jerry Cotter had sunk his prospect shaft.

Helen Shaw was hurrying towards her sleek sorrel, where the horse stood over trailing reins. Sheriff Ott Noland had hoisted his blubbery hulk aboard his stout horse, and was riding along beside Bud Shaw and Sam Braddock as they walked towards the head of a brush-choked ravine. That brushy ravine, Raine noticed, ran down to the deep, crooked canyon Narrow Creek had cut through the tumbled hills.

"So that's the way of it," Raine commented aloud. "Bud Shaw and Sam Braddock left their hosses off yonder in that brushy draw, or mebbe down in the main canyon. I can't see the mounts from up here. And when I peeked over this rim a while ago, Bud and Sam Braddock were standin' so close to the base of the cliff I couldn't see them, either. No wonder I got into a tight."

Raine turned away from the rim then, and walked to where his splendid blue roan horse, Wampum, stood regarding him out of bright, intelligent eyes. Raine slapped Wampum's shoulder affectionately, then gathered up pliant reins and mounted to the saddle.

It took the ranger fully a half hour to locate a break in the bluffs, follow a narrow stock trail down to the bench, then return to Jerry Cotter's prospect shaft. Helen Shaw was waiting there for him, swinging gracefully into her sorrel's saddle as the ranger approached.

"What a beautiful horse you have, Tom Raine!" the girl greeted him, her eyes

shining as she studied Wampum's clean lines.

"Thanks," Raine smiled. "I sorta like Wampum."

His smile faded when he saw Sheriff Ott Noland galloping towards him along the bench. Sam Braddock and Bud Shaw were behind the sheriff, spurring their mounts to prevent being left behind. Raine heard Helen Shaw cry out suddenly, and knew without asking questions what the trouble was. He, too, had seen the bright sheen of handcuffs that linked big Bud Shaw's wrists together.

"You've arrested Bud, regardless of what Tom Raine said about his innocence!" the girl charged as the sheriff reined to a halt. Bud Shaw looked pale and scared, but managed a crooked grin.

"Braddock still thinks you're bluffin' about knowin' somethin' that'd keep my neck out of a noose, Raine," he explained. "So he told Ott Noland to go ahead and arrest me."

"So you finally came out in the open with one of your rotten schemes, did you?" Helen Shaw said so scathingly that Raine glanced quickly at her. The girl was looking steadily at Sam Braddock, who squirmed and reddened under the lashing stare.

"Now don't misunderstand, Helen!" the merchant-trader said sharply.

"I've never misunderstood your actions, Sam," the girl told him gravely. "Oh, I've pretended to be taken in by your smooth lies and doublecrossing, because I needed time to plan some way of scotching your schemes for sending Bud to prison or the gallows, and to keep you from stealing the fortune my father so unfortunately left within reach of your greedy hands."

"Helen, why didn't you let me know how you felt about this yellow-eyed buzzard?" Bud Shaw burst out.

"Helen, stop talkin' nonsense!" Sam Braddock said in a thin, tight voice. "You'll be ashamed and sorry for the things you've just said when you find out why I told Ott Noland to go ahead and arrest Bud."

"There goes that oily tongue again!" Bud Shaw said through grinding teeth.

"All right, why did you have Bud arrested, Sam?" the girl asked after a strained silence.

"I had Bud arrested because I think Raine can help him, Helen!" Braddock said. "But that Injun-raised Raine cuss is as tight-mouthed as a clam with lockjaw. I was afraid he wouldn't explain anything to me or the sheriff, and got to thinkin' what a mess Bud would be in if somethin' happened to Tom Raine before he got around to tellin' somebody whatever it is he knows. Raine is a badgeman same as Ott Noland, and badgemen usually help each other all they can. So I figured if I had Ott arrest Bud, Raine would blurt out whatever he knows to keep Noland out of trouble."

Helen Shaw was more than just surprised. Raine watched a slow flush of confusion and embarrassment brighten her cheeks.

"Sam, if I've wronged you, I'm terribly sorry," she told Braddock. He met her eyes in stony silence, a hardness in his expression that made Raine uneasy.

"Raine, I think you can understand my wantin' to get this confab over with as quick as possible," Braddock said. "If yuh do know anything that'll keep Bud Shaw's neck out of a noose, why not say yore piece while there are witnesses?"

"You still think somethin' might happen to me before I could testify in court?" Raine asked slowly.

"If yuh come pokin' around here for the reason I think you did, there's mighty liable to be a bullet in yore hide before yuh'd have a chance to tell a court anything you know," Braddock retorted coldly.

"Why do yuh think I came to this Agua Dulce country?" Raine countered.

"My hunch is that yuh come here to investigate the death of a feller named Vic Kimball, who was drygulched near Agua Dulce, four months ago," Braddock answered promptly.

Navajo Raine stiffened in surprise, but not because of what Braddock had said. The ranger's green eyes swung sharply to Helen Shaw, as he heard her cry out.

"What's wrong, Helen?" Raine asked quickly.

"Blast you, Raine, you was just stringin' me along!" Bud Shaw roared before his sister could reply.

Raine turned to face Bud, green eyes narrowing as he saw the big man's twisted face and blazing eyes.

"What's got into you, Bud?" he snapped sharply.

"Why stall about it?" Shaw choked furiously. "Yuh did come in here to investigate Vic Kimball's killin', didn't yuh?"

"I did," Raine admitted. "But why

should that get you so hot under the collar?"

"You acted like yuh was my friend!" Bud Shaw croaked. "But all the time yuh was aimin' to jail me, Raine."

"You can't jail Bud, Tom Raine!" Helen Shaw cried. "I don't care how strong circumstantial evidence is against him, he did not murder Vic Kimball."

Navajo Raine turned to face Helen Shaw, his green eyes cold and alert.

"Who says Bud killed Vic Kimball?" he asked quietly.

"I do!" Sheriff Ott Noland horned in angrily. "I been workin' myself to a frazzle, tryin' to scratch together evidence enough to convince a jury. But now you've poked in here and messed up my plans, you meddlin' hellion!"

"Vic Kimball was shot in the back, Raine, just the way old Jerry Cotter got it," Bud Shaw said wearily.

"Why do people accuse you of Vic Kimball's murder?" Raine asked.

"Because I shot off my fool mouth, I reckon," Bud Shaw said thickly. "When Vic Kimball come in here, he posed as a hoss buyer, and hired me to scout around the country and locate good hosses that could be bought cheap. But every time I told him where he could find stock for sale, he stalled off, wouldn't even go see about it. And when I'd been workin' a month, and wanted my wages, he stalled about that, too."

"So you lost yore temper and made fight talk, eh?" Raine prompted.

"After I'd tried four-five times to collect my wages without gettin' a dime, I cornered that sawed-off, scar-faced runt of a Vic Kimball in town one day and told him to shell out, then and there," Bud said heavily. "A crowd gathered around us, listenin' to the squabble. Kimball laughed in my face, and said he'd pay me off with tobacco tags, soon as he'd saved up enough of them.

"I got scorchin' mad, and told him I'd collect that money he owed me, one way or another. Which turned out to be dangerous talk on my part, because Vic Kimball was found at the edge of town the followin' mornin', a bushwhacker's bullet between his shoulder blades and his pockets all turned out."

"Several fellers in Agua Dulce seen Vic flashin' a big roll of money that day him and Bud quarreled over wages," Sheriff Ott Noland said angrily. "Bud no doubt heard about Kimball havin' that bankroll, so he tried to collect what was due him. When Kimball wouldn't pay off, Bud waylaid him, shot him out of the saddle as he rode away from town, and took that dinero off his dead body."

"How about an alibi, Bud?" Raine asked, "Can't yuh prove where yuh were between the time you quarreled with Vic Kimball and the discovery of his body?"

"No, dern the luck, I can't prove where I was!" Shaw groaned. "After my growl with Vic Kimball, I got—er—tipsy, and rode off into the badlands. I fell off my hoss in a sandy wash, and didn't wake up until after sunup the next day. When I got back to town Vic Kimball's body had been found, and I was bein' accused of murderin' that scar-faced little tightwad."

"Yuh know, I reckon, that Vic Kimball was a deputy U. S. marshal, in here on a special mission?" Navajo Raine asked slowly.

A second after tossing that bombshell, he pressed his hands over his ears, making a wry face. Sheriff Ott Noland was bellowing questions in a foghorn voice that drowned out the startled remarks Helen and Bud Shaw were making.

Raine pretended to be studying the three badly surprised people as he frowned at the noise they were making, but he was actually watching Sam Braddock from the tail of his eye.

Braddock sat his saddle calmly, tawny eyes pinching down to slits, lips pulled tight against his teeth.

"Yuh're a dad-blamed liar, Tom Raine!" Sheriff Noland bellowed. "Vic Kimball wasn't no deputy marshal, and yuh know he wasn't."

"Vic Kimball was a deputy U. S. marshal," Raine said flatly. "You can check that easy enough by gettin' in touch with the U. S. marshal's office at the capital."

"What was Kimball investigatin' around here, Raine?" Sam Braddock asked before the sheriff could sound off again.

"He was investigatin' a tip the marshal's office got that a notorious train robber was hidin' out in Agua Dulce," the ranger replied.

"You talk like a man out of his mind!" Sheriff Noland yelled. "There ain't a railroad in this neck of the woods, so how could anybody rob a train?"

"I didn't say a train had been robbed here," Raine pointed out. "I said a notorious train robber was reported to be holed up in yore town. This hombre and two others held up a train back in Kansas, six

year ago. They killed an expressman and two guards. They got around thirty thousand dollars in cash money, plus several bags of registered mail. The three bandits were well disguised, and vanished, unrecognized, after the holdup. But takin' that mail put Uncle Sam on their trail, and Government men never give up until they get their man."

"Tom, that clears Bud of suspicion!" Helen Shaw cried.

"What do you mean?" Sheriff Ott Noland glared at her.

"Why, Vic Kimball came here, trying to locate a murderous train robber!" she said excitedly. "The bandit recognized Kimball, guessed why he was here, and murdered him after Bud and Kimball had that quarrel in public. The murderer knew that Bud would be blamed after the foolish thing he had said about getting his money from Kimball one way or another."

"Stuff!" the fat sheriff fumed. "Tom Raine and his derned fairy tales ain't changin' my mind ary bit. Bud Shaw killed Vic Kimball and robbed him. And he killed old Jerry Cotter too."

"Raine, *do* you know anything that will help Bud?" Sam Braddock broke the silence he had held for some time.

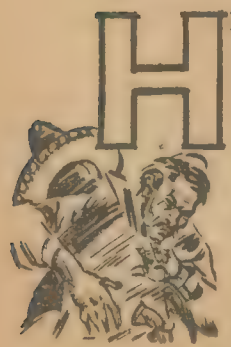
"I know he didn't kill Jerry Cotter," Raine said calmly.

"How do yuh know he didn' kill Cotter?" Braddock countered impatiently.

"I found Bud Shaw about three o'clock yesterday afternoon, passed out cold beside Crooked Creek, a couple of miles above here," Raine spoke swiftly. "I loaded Bud on his horse, took him to a cave back along the bluffs up there, and put him to bed on my blankets."

CHAPTER IV

Bud Shaw's Alibi



HELEN SHAW gave a gasp of relief while Braddock gazed at Raine with narrowed eyes.

"You remained there with him until he was able to ride again?" the girl asked quickly.

"No," Raine told her. "I left Bud a little before sundown, and didn't get back to where he was until nine last night."

"Ha!" the sheriff said exultantly. "Bud got up, got on his hoss, rode down here, beefed Jerry Cotter, and was back to that cave before you was."

"Not much!" Raine drawled. "I stripped Bud Shaw down to his underwear before I left. I took his hoss, six-shooter, carbine and his clothes with me when I left him. If he got up, waltzed through these badlands barefoot, I reckon the soles of his feet will show it."

"Tom Raine, you're wonderful!" Helen cried.

"A jury might want to know why yuh took the bother of practically strippin' Bud, then takin' his stuff and his hoss away with yuh, Raine," Sam Braddock said thinly.

"A man in the condition Bud Shaw was in might come out of it a little and try to ride off," Raine said simply. "If he did, he could fall, get a foot caught in a stirrup, and be dragged to death. I took his clothes as well as his hoss, because I was afraid he'd come awake and try to hike out of there. A drunk blunderin' around this country could fall over a bluff and break his neck, or fall in a swift stream like Crooked Creek and drown."

"Blah!" the huge sheriff sneered. "Yuh've framed up a story that's slick enough to fool a jury, all right. Only I'll charge that Bud Shaw murdered Jerry Cotter before you found him wallerin' around in the trail, dog drunk. Now see if yore weasel's brain can skitter around that, dang yuh!"

"When I left Bud Shaw just before sundown yesterday, I rode here to this claim of Cotter's," Raine said calmly. "I had supper here with Jerry Cotter, and talked with him until a little after eight o'clock last night."

"You *what?*" Sam Braddock's voice was a reedy whine of amazement. Raine took his glance off the purpling, rage-addled sheriff and looked at Sam Braddock.

"I said I had supper with Jerry Cotter last night, Braddock," Raine told him. "What's so surprisin' about that?"

"Why—er—I wasn't surprised." Braddock frowned. "I was sorta jolted, hearin' yuh clear Bud Shaw so plumb shore. Yuh—uh—just stumbled across this claim of Cotter's by accident?"

"I didn't ride down here by accident," Raine replied crisply. "Jerry Cotter wrote a letter to Burt Mossman, my captain, and told him to send a man in here if he wanted to know who murdered Vic

Kimball. Captain Mossman sent me, and I was on my way to Cotter's claim when I found Bud in the trail."

"Cotter tell yuh much?" Braddock asked in a low, tense voice.

"He told me nothin'." Raine shrugged. "He was waitin' for another hombre to show up here to back up his story."

"But Luke Pryor didn't show!" Braddock said.

"Luke Pryor didn't show up," Raine said gravely. "But since I hadn't mentioned his name, how did you know Pryor was the man Jerry Cotter expected?"

"It was simple," Braddock declared. "Luke Pryor and Jerry Cotter came into this country four years ago and began prospecting. But in that length of time they've never spoken even civilly to any local person. So it wasn't too hard for me to guess that Jerry Cotter was expecting Luke Pryor to come along and back up whatever tale he meant to tell you."

"Yuh didn't ride down here with Bud Shaw this mornin'?" Sheriff Noland shot the question at Raine harshly.

"No," the ranger replied. "I pulled out a little before daylight this mornin', and left Bud asleep in the cave. I went over to Mormon Knob, where Jerry Cotter told me Luke Pryor was workin' a claim of theirs. I found the claim, but sign told me Pryor hadn't been around there for several days. I rode back this way, found Bud had left the cave, and came on here."

BUD SHAW cleared his throat. He was red faced with embarrassment. "And I derned near thanked yuh for what yuh've done for me by puttin' a bullet through yuh!" he said hoarsely. "Raine, I don't remember you bein' around a-tall, but I shore done some tall wonderin' about who bedded me down in that cave, took my clothes off me, and staked my hoss handy. If I can ever thank—"

"Don't waste no breath thankin' this Injun-brained Raine hellion!" the fat sheriff blared triumphantly. "I just out-foxed him by gettin' him to admit that he wasn't with yuh when yuh come back here this mornin'. Yuh rode up, beefed old Jerry Cotter; then scooted on to town and told yore derned lies about findin' him dead!"

"Tom, what'll we do?" Helen Shaw asked shakily.

"Get a sawbones out here to examine Cotter's remains just as fast as yuh can," the ranger replied. "Cotter's body is stiff and set, and the blood on his clothes looks black, it's so dry. A doctor will tell yuh that Jerry Cotter has been dead many hours. Since I didn't leave Bud until just before dawn, Noland's claim that Bud Shaw killed Jerry Cotter this mornin' won't stick."

Sheriff Ott Noland almost screamed in rage as realization came that his last hope of charging Bud Shaw with murdering Jerry Cotter had been effectively blocked.

* * * * *

Navajo Tom Raine was more than mildly vexed with Helen Shaw by the time they approached Agua Dulce. Frowning, the ranger studied the sprawling litle town out of troubled eyes.

He was on high ground, crossing a ridgetop at the moment. Another quarter-mile ride would bring him to the town's outskirts, and Raine saw that the one lone street was thronged by unusually active people.

The rushing and scurrying of those people suggested that they were more than normally busy at something, yet Raine put the thought out of mind and turned his attention to Helen Shaw, who rode at his stirrup. His displeasure increased, for Helen was half turned in the saddle, gazing back at Sheriff Ott Noland, Sam Braddock and her brother.

"Helen, will you please give me your attention for about two minutes?" Raine asked in a crisp voice.

The girl twirled around, flushed and obviously startled.

"I—I'm sorry, Tom, if you said something I missed," she stammered nervously.

"In the last hour I've probably said a lot of things you missed, young lady!" he told her. "But we won't go into that. Just quit star-gazin' in Sam Braddock's direction long enough to see if I've got the facts I asked yuh for."

"Tom Raine!" Helen cried indignantly. "I've not been gazing at Sam Braddock."

"Fiddle-faddle!" he snorted. "Yuh're in love with him, aren't yuh?"

"I certainly am not in love with Sam Braddock!" she said with spirit.

"Mebbe I'm jealous," Raine said, and suddenly he was smiling down at the girl, green eyes twinkling.

"Flatterer!" she laughed. "But at least you have my full attention, now."

"All right, let's see if I've got the information I've been askin' you for this last hour," Raine sobered quickly. "You tell me that yore father came to Agua Dulce

fifteen years ago, and began buying and selling ranches, mines, livestock and the like."

"We came here fifteen years ago, right after mother died, back in Nebraska," Helen Shaw nodded.

"Your dad prospered, made a lot of money," Raine said musingly. "You told me Sam Braddock showed up in Agua Dulce five years ago, set himself up in the biggest store in town, and started buying and selling land, cattle and mines on the side. Did yore father feel that Braddock was hornin' into his business?"

HELEN knitted her brows and then shook her pretty head.

"Goodness, no!" she declared. "Father said Sam Braddock was one of the shrewdest traders he had ever met, and within a year after Sam came to town Dad took him in as a full partner."

"So yuh told me," Raine said. "And you also told me that when yore father died about a year ago, he left a whackin' big fortune tied up in this Agua Dulce Land and Cattle Company, owned by Braddock and him. That money rightfully belongs to you and Bud, yet neither of yuh can touch a dime of it. Right?"

"That's correct," Helen Shaw sighed wearily. "Bud and I have an income from the business, of course. But Dad's will reads that we're not to have the principal so long as Sam Braddock operates the Agua Dulce Land and Cattle Company."

"Have you any idea why yore father did a thing like that to you and Bud?" Raine asked gravely.

"I'm only a woman, Tom." Helen Shaw smiled a little bitterly. "Dad was one of those men who absolutely refused to believe that a woman could understand anything more complicated than cooking, sewing and keeping house, so naturally he would not put a fortune in my hands. And poor Bud! Dad swore Bud couldn't swap hats with a school boy and not be cheated out of his own ears, therefore he was afraid to leave his fortune in Bud's hands."

"Bud looks like a hoss-and-rope man, to me," Raine said musingly.

"He is," Helen replied promptly. "Bud is one of the best horse breakers in the country, and knows cattle raising better than most men his age do."

"Wouldn't yore father take Bud in the ranchin' business?" Raine wanted to know.

"He would not!" Helen replied. "But don't misunderstand what I'm saying, Tom. Dad was wonderful to me and to Bud, too. But my father had absolutely no interest, or faith either, in any business except the buy, barter and sell game he knew so well."

"Well, yore dad left you and Bud in a fix, at that," the ranger mused. "If Bud could get enough of that money to go into the ranchin' business—Say, now!"

CHAPTER V

Trouble in Town

ABRUPTLY Navajo Raine had snapped erect in the saddle, uttering the last two words sharply. He was looking ahead, eyes raking along Agua Dulce's main street, which he was about to enter. People were milling around the boardwalks and out in the dusty street, their voices lifting in an excited babble Raine knew of old.

"Look at that crowd before father's office!" Helen Shaw exclaimed. "Tom, what are they up to?"

"Suppose we find out," he suggested.

They galloped along the street, halting at the outer fringes of a throng that made a half circle before a sizable adobe building. Navajo Raine's alert eyes flicked the gold lettering on a big plate glass window. AGUA DULCE LAND & CATTLE COMPANY, the sign read. Then Raine's eyes turned to the recessed doorway, and his lean face drew into stony hardness as he studied the two men who stood with their backs to the thick oaken door, staring up at him out of cold, wise eyes.

"Buck Yount and Tigg Mundy," Raine muttered.

"Be careful, Tom!" Helen Shaw said tensely. "I don't like the way Buck Yount and Tigg Mundy are watching you. They're dangerous."

"They're professional smoke merchants—men who sell their gun-skill to the highest bidder," the ranger answered gravely. "How long have they been in Agua Dulce?"

"Sam Braddock hired them three months ago," Helen said in a low tone.

Raine swung out of Wampum's saddle. Someone in the crowd had recognized him, called his name loudly. Heads were turning, and the buzz of blending voices died rapidly.

"Let me through, folks!" the ranger's voice rang through the silence. The tall ranger strode to the boardwalk, crossed it, and stepped up to face the two professional gunmen who stood in the doorway.

Tigg Mundy grinned, showing crooked yellow teeth. He was a stocky, thick-chested fellow, with a flat, thick-lipped face and muddy brown eyes that were as wary as the eyes of some animal.

"Howdy, Raine," Buck Yount said stiffly.

He was a slim, sallow skinned man with chill gray eyes and a hawk-beaked, tight-lipped face that rarely showed any emotion.

"What's the trouble here?" Raine asked the gun-hung pair bluntly.

"All we know is what we've heared," Tigg Mundy said in a deep-toned, lazy voice.

"Eph Somner there, come larrupin' to the sheriff's office a while ago, claimin' he'd found a dead man up here in Sam Braddock's private office," Buck Yount said, nodding towards a wiry, gray haired man who had come forward from the sidewalk.

Navajo Raine looked down at Eph Somner, noting the oldster's quick, easy stride and the sharp blue eyes that somehow belied the man's age.

"So you're Tom Raine, the famous ranger?" Somner smiled. "Glad to know you, son."

Raine took the oldster's proffered hand, surprised at the steely strength in the thin, bony fingers.

"I janitor this buildin', as well as several others around town, Raine," Eph Somner was saying. "Buck Yount and Tigg Mundy collared me early this mornin', said their boss, Sam Braddock, didn't want me to bother cleanin' up here today. But I reckon I'm gettin' absent-minded in my old age. Anyhow, I come on down here and went to work—after I noticed Yount and Mundy wasn't watchin' me too close."

"Bein' absent-minded has its virtues, in some cases," Raine smiled faintly, glancing at Buck Yount and Tigg Mundy. They were red-faced, glaring at old Eph Somner out of slitted eyes.

"Where did yuh find Luke Pryor's body, Eph?" Raine asked.

BUCK YOUNT and Tigg Mundy lost their angry look, to stare, pop-eyed, at the tall ranger. Eph Somner gulped as if someone had punched him smartly in the midriff.

"How'n thunder did you know who was dead back there in Sam Braddock's office?" the oldster asked in a brittle voice.

"Jerry Cotter and Luke Pryor sent a note to the ranger headquarters, claimin' they could name the man who murdered Vic Kimball here a while back," Raine said in swift, calm tones. "I got to Cotter's claim late yesterday, had supper with him, and talked with him quite a while. Some time last night, Jerry Cotter was murdered. But the killer made a few mistakes, as killers generally do."

"You've spotted the killer?" old Eph Somner asked excitedly.

"I've spotted him," Raine nodded grimly. "He murdered Vic Kimball, a deputy U. S. marshal, who was here checking up on the very man who murdered him. Then the killer shot Jerry Cotter through the back to silence him, and I figured Mr. Killer would get Luke Pryor next. Or *was* it Luke Pryor's body you found in this buildin', Eph?"

Eph Somner nodded vigorously, saying something at the same time. But Raine did not catch the old fellow's words, for the crowd had heard everything he had said, and was roaring wildly for more information.

"Keys!" Raine shouted to Eph Somner. "You have keys to this door?"

The oldster yanked out a heavy brass key ring, selected one key, and stepped up to the door, shouldering Tigg Mundy out of his way. Mundy started cursing, but broke off in mid-sentence when he found Navajo Raine's narrow green eyes watching him coldly.

Eph Somner got the door open, and Raine flicked a thumb at Tigg Mundy and Buck Yount, motioning them inside. The ranger entered on their heels, sighing in relief when Eph Somner slammed and locked the heavy portal.

Raine glanced briefly about the big, well-furnished room he found himself in. Except for filing cabinets and a couple of flat-topped desks, it looked, he decided, more like a comfortable hotel lobby.

"What's the idea pushin' me and Tigg around, Raine?" Buck Yount asked in a

thin, angry voice.

Raine looked levelly at the two tough roosters, saw that they were tense and proddy.

"You two-for-a-nickel gunslingers have been prancin' around just out of the law's reach for a long time," he told them. "But mebbe yuh've finally walked in reach of the law's hands."

"You accusin' us of beefin' this Vic Kimball gent you claim was a deputy U. S. marshal, or Jerry Cotter, or Luke Pryor?" Tigg Mundy asked in a gruff voice.

"I'll get around to thinkin' about small-fry like you two sooner or later," Raine retorted. "I'll try to dig up enough evidence to hang yuh both."

Inwardly, Raine was amused. Tigg Mundy and Buck Yount were tough customers, and knew it. They wanted other men to recognize their toughness, look upon them as dangerous fellows to cross. They were furious over the two-bit rating Raine had given them, but were too smart to make an issue of the matter.

"Lead on, Eph," Raine advised.

"This way—back yonder to Sam Braddock's private office," the oldster said gravely. "But what I've got to show you ain't pretty, son."

Eph Somner had not been joking when he said what he had to show Navajo Tom Raine was not pretty. Raine stood now, looking somberly at a lanky figure that was hunched down on the floor of a tiny cloak closet.

Luke Pryor's ankles had been wired tightly together, and his hands had been drawn behind his back, the wrists securely fastened by wire. Pryor's body was in a sitting posture, knees drawn up towards his chest, his head thrown back. And even the flaccid mask of death had not hidden a certain viciousness in that bent-nosed, lantern-jawed face with the thick, loose lips and close-set eyes.

PRYOR'S egg-shaped head was a mass of terrible cuts and bruises that were half hidden under wads of bloody hair that had dried to blackness. Raine squatted on his heels, went over the rigid corpse carefully. There were no wounds, except those on the ill-shaped head. But careful examination of the flesh around the wires that circled Luke Pryor's wrists told Raine that the man had been shackled a long time before someone beat him to death. Raine stood up, absently wiping his hands along the seams of his trouser legs.

"Nary a trace of blood on this carpet, or even in the closet with the body, son," old Eph Somner said calmly. "Judgin' from the way them wires cut Pryor's wrists and scarred the heavy miner's boots he's wearin', I'd say he was held prisoner somewhere two-three days, then beat to death and lugged in here after the blood had dried plumb hard."

"Where and when?" Raine asked the oldster.

"Where and when?" Eph Somner echoed faintly.

"Where and when were you a peace officer?" the ranger said with a smile.

"I'll be dogged!" Somner grinned sheepishly. "Sorta showed my hand, didn't I? But I ain't an officer any more, son."

"No?" Raine asked.

"Nope," Somner said a little sadly. "I buckled on a gun and star twenty-odd years ago, and clamped the lid on Agua Dulce when it was a wild boom town. But two years ago they moved the county seat up here from Cholla Bend, and with lazy old Nick Shote, the sheriff, loafin' around town all the time, they decided I wasn't needed as marshal any longer. I was all set to run against Shote, last election. But derned if Sam Braddock didn't pass out word that he was backin' that numbskulled Ott Noland. Braddock set out so much free whisky, and done so much smooth talkin', that Noland was elected."

"Mebbe yuh'll wind up as sheriff yet, Eph," Raine said gravely.

"Do me and Tigg have to stand around listenin' to this jabber, or can we go find a cold beer?" Buck Yount asked grumpily.

"As the lawyer hombres put it, you two aided and abetted a murderer," Raine said bluntly. "So just guess where yuh're goin'."

The double-gunned pair jumped as if shot at. They exchanged startled glances, then looked at Navajo Raine out of eyes bright with alarm.

"What in blazes are you talkin' about?" Buck Yount asked angrily.

"If yuh're fixin' to frame Buck and me, yuh'll hub trouble!" Tigg Mundy warned.

"You two tried to keep Eph Somner from comin' here to this buildin' to do his work this mornin'," Raine summed up rapidly. "Eph savvied that you had some special reason for that, and came anyway. He found the body of a murdered

man hidden here, and a jury won't take much convincin' to decide that you two hellions either murdered Luke Pryor and hid the body here, or that you know who did murder him and tried to shield the killer."

"Raine, me and Buck didn't know nothin' about Pryor's carcass bein' here," Tigg Mundy declared uneasily. "Braddock asked us to get hold of Eph, tell him to forget about cleanin' here today. That's all Buck and me know about it."

"We'll check that yarn mighty soon, I think," Raine said, and cocked his head in a listening attitude.

There was a growing rumble of excited voices, the pound of many booted feet out in the main office. Then the door Navajo Raine was watching burst open, and Sam Braddock leaped into his private office, tawny eyes raging as he looked about. Sheriff Ott Noland steamed in behind Braddock.

Raine studied Sam Braddock out of cold, green eyes that were narrowed thoughtfully. Braddock was pale to the lips.

"Did you tell Tigg Mundy and Buck Yount to keep Eph Somner from coming here and cleanin' up this office today?" Raine asked the question suddenly and with force.

"I did not!" Braddock snapped hotly. "Why the devil would I want my offices left uncleaned?"

"Tigg! Buck!" Raine rapped out harshly.

THE two gunmen had begun crouching, edging slowly apart. They stopped, turned rage-filled eyes to the ranger.

"You two knuckle-heads calm down!" Raine ordered sternly.

"He lied, Raine!" Tigg Mundy's voice was a gentle purr. "Braddock lied, and that puts Buck and me in a split stick."

"Of course Braddock lied, which is exactly what I hoped he'd be fool enough to do," Raine said calmly. "And his lyin' convinces me that you two told me the truth, so behave before you do wind up in a split stick."

"Why would I tell these two gunslingers to keep the janitor away from here today, then claim I hadn't told 'em anything like that?" Braddock asked angrily.

"Because you wanted me to think they put that corpse in the closet, yonder," Raine nodded toward the cubicle where Luke Pryor's body was.

"A corpse?" Braddock cried. "Here?"

He and the sheriff whirled at the same time, charged towards the closet door. Raine turned to face a bunch of townsmen who had rushed through the doorway into the office.

"There's a showdown coming here in this room, and within the next few minutes," the ranger said evenly. "There's mighty apt to be bullets flyin', and if some of you hombres stop stray slugs, don't blame anybody but yoreselves."

There was another hasty scramble, excited cries, frenzied curses. Then the curious citizens were out of the room, and there was a sizable clear space directly before the open door. Raine turned away as Sheriff Ott Noland came lumbering towards him, huge face screwed into a fierce scowl.

"I've got yuh now, Raine!" Noland croaked. "Yuh rode into town ahead of Mr. Braddock and me. Yuh found Luke Pryor, tied him up, beat his brains out, and—"

"You thick-headed fool, shut up!" Braddock's voice burst out harshly.

"Well, yuh said yoreownself, Mr. Braddock, that mebbe this Raine cuss—" the sheriff began uneasily. Braddock glared him to silence, then turned on Raine.

"Who found Luke Pryor's body?" he asked crisply.

"Eph Somner, after Eph ignored yore orders to stay away from here today," Raine replied.

Braddock sneered at the ranger, showing his contempt for Navajo's legal status. The sheriff was the big boss around the county, and he enjoyed strutting before an audience, no matter how small that audience. Now, Braddock threw out his chest importantly, tucking his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, and standing on his toes, swayed back and forth as if considering the entire case.

"I still say I didn't give them orders, but we'll talk about that later." Braddock gave a shrug. "Right now I'm interested in gettin' this mess cleared up. I'll go call Doc Whitter, and—get yore hands off me, Raine!"

Braddock's voice ended on a rasping note of anger. He had started towards the doorway as he talked, his tawny eyes twitching from a nervousness he was trying desperately to hide. Navajo Raine reached out, caught Braddock by one arm, and spun him around. "Yuh're under arrest, Braddock!" Raine said calmly.

CHAPTER VI

Six-Gun Finish

FOR a moment Sam Braddock stared at Navajo Raine out of eyes that were bright with deep emotion.

"Arrest?" he echoed finally. "Raine, don't be a fool! Yuh can't arrest me!"

"I can—and have," the ranger said coldly. "I charge you with robbin' a train, stealin' United States Mail and cold-blooded murder!"

"How much help did yuh fetch here with you, Raine?" Braddock asked in a slow, hard voice.

"Rangers ride alone, Braddock!" Raine snapped.

"I asked because yore whole fancy-pants outfit couldn't arrest me on the crazy charges yuh've named and make it stick," Braddock sneered. He faced towards the doorway, grinning crookedly at the awed crowd. "Men, did yuh ever hear such tall tales in yore life?" he asked.

There was a mutter of low voices, punctured by a few yapping protests from Braddock boot-lickers. Navajo Raine kept his eye on Sam Braddock, who had whirled back to face him.

"There, Raine!" Braddock crowed. "Do you think this town will let you come in here and abuse me, their wealthiest citizen?"

"Yore weak-kneed bunch don't worry me," Raine shrugged. "Six years ago, you and Luke Pryor and Jerry Cotter held up and robbed a train back in Kansas. You three murdered a baggageman and two guards—after you had disarmed them. You got a sizable chunk of cash in that robbery, besides whatever yuh got out of the registered mail yuh took."

Sam Braddock's face was white, and the skin seemed actually to crawl as it bunched and puckered around his mouth and eyes.

"Fairy tales!"

He choked the words out.

"After that robbery, you three vanished like ghosts," Raine went on calmly. "A year later, you drifted in here, set yoreself up in business, and started makin' money hand-over-fist. But yore two bandit pardners, Jerry Cotter and Luke Pryor, didn't do so well. They squandered their share of the train loot inside of a couple of years, then heard that you were here at Agua Dulce ridin' high, and dropped in to call on you.

"Those two hellions posed as prospectors, poked around the hills to keep people from gettin' too suspicious—and were livin' off you, threatenin' to upset yore apple cart unless you shelled out money to them."

Raine broke off, glanced at the sheriff who had cursed thickly and started edging towards him. Noland stopped when he saw Raine's wooden face and his slitted green eyes.

"But Jerry Cotter and Luke Pryor got to nickin' you too hard, Braddock," Raine said evenly. "Knowin' they couldn't do too much talkin' without pokin' their own necks in a hangman's noose, you finally cut them off completely. But Cotter and Pryor had had a taste of easy goin', and decided to throw a scare into you that'd put you back in line.

"So they wrote to the United States Marshal's office, and said a notorious train robber was holed up here. They did not sign that letter, but the marshal sent deputy Vic Kimball here to investigate."

"So I recognized Kimball and beefed him, eh?" Braddock tried to sneer, but failed.

"No, yuh didn't know Vic Kimball from Adam," Raine said. "He posed as a tough, half-shady stock buyer, and refused to pay Bud Shaw wages he owed him just to make hisself seem crooked and ornery.

"But yuh'd been wrackin' that weasel brain of yores for some scheme that'd send Bud Shaw to prison or to the gallows, because yuh wanted the fortune old Ed Shaw left Helen and Bud. So when Bud and Vic Kimball had a quarrel in public, and Bud made a threat to collect his money one way or another, yuh saw what you considered a chance to get Bud's neck snapped by a hangman's noose. You murdered Vic Kimball, and I'd like to have seen those yellow eyes of yores when yuh searched him and run onto his badge and credentials."

BRADDOCK made an impatient gesture with his hand.

"Fool!" he cried. "I didn't know Kimball was an officer until you said so out at Cotter's claim this mornin'."

"Yore actions out there give that the lie, Braddock," Raine retorted. "When I mentioned that Vic Kimball had been a deputy U. S. marshal, Sheriff Noland, Helen Shaw and Bud Shaw were badly surprised. But you didn't turn a hair, so I knew right then that you'd murdered Kimball and turned his pockets out to make it look like Bud Shaw had killed and robbed him."

"Lies!" Braddock croaked.

"But you killin' Kimball gave Jerry Cotter and Luke Pryor a new hold over you," Raine went on. "They probably told you to start payin' off again or they'd tell the rangers who beefed Vic Kimball.

"Evidently you refused, knowin' that they wouldn't go that far. But just to make you sweat, they did write a note to ranger headquarters, and signed their names to it, askin' that a ranger come up here if we wanted to know who killed Vic Kimball."

"They signed—" Braddock broke off quickly, leaving the sentence unfinished.

"Jerry Cotter and Luke Pryor didn't aim to give me any information that would prove you killed Vic Kimball," Raine declared. "But they threw a scare into yuh by lettin' yuh know that they had written a letter to the Arizona Rangers. That scared yuh plenty, so you got hold of Luke Pryor, wired his wrists and ankles together, and held him captive for several days, tryin' to make him tell you what was in that letter.

"Pryor wouldn't talk, but Jerry Cotter rode into town after I left his camp last night. He told you that I'd come in answer to that letter him and Pryor wrote. Cotter knew that you had either murdered Pryor or that you had him captive, because Pryor was two days overdue at Jerry Cotter's claim."

"I didn't see Jerry Cotter last night," Braddock said harshly.

"You saw Cotter, all right," Raine said grimly. "He threatened to tell me plenty unless you produced Luke Pryor, pronto. So you pretend to give in, admitted that you had Luke Pryor captive, and agreed to take Jerry Cotter to Pryor.

"Instead of that, yuh put a rifle ball through Cotter's back the minute yuh caught him off guard, then went to where yuh were holdin' Luke Pryor and beat his brains out with a club, or mebbe that gun yuh pack."

"Jerry Cotter was killed out there at his claim, you fool!" Braddock shrilled. "He must have been standin' right on the edge of that shaft, otherwise his body wouldn't have fell into the hole."

"With Jerry Cotter and Luke Pryor too dead to ever talk, you got to feelin' so much better that crooked brain of yores started workin' again," Raine answered grimly. "Jerry Cotter had mentioned that he'd sent Bud Shaw away from the mine that day, and yuh saw another chance to frame Bud, get him hanged so's you could marry his sister and claim the fortune Ed Shaw left his kids. So you lugged Jerry Cotter's body back to the claim and dumped it down the prospect hole—which was a bad mistake on yore part."

"Jerry Cotter was either shot while he was down in that hole at work, or fell into the shaft when the bullet hit him in the back as he stood out on top," Braddock managed to bluster.

"The bullet that hit Jerry Cotter between the shoulders flatted on a bone, ripped his chest open as it came out," Raine said harshly. "His clothes were soaked with blood that had dried. If he had been shot while he was down in that hole at work, or if the bullet that killed him had knocked him into the mine, the bottom of that shaft would have looked like a slaughter pen. Yet there wasn't one single blood smear on the rocks at the bottom of that shaft! So obviously Cotter's body was dumped in there hours after he was killed."

"Prove it!" Braddock said in husky tones.

"I'm afraid I can't," Raine said calmly.

TAKEN completely by surprise, Braddock stared. There was a sharp oath of amazement from old Eph Somner, a rumble of excitement from the tense crowd banked just beyond the office doorway.

"I can't prove that you're one of the three bandits who held up a train in Kansas, six years ago and helped murder three unarmed men," Navajo Raine said slowly. "I can't prove that you murdered Vic Kimball, and framed Bud Shaw for the deed. Nor can I prove that you murdered Jerry Cotter last night and dumped his body in that shaft."

Sam Braddock was like a man awakening from death. He seemed to expand, to grow in stature, as he watched Raine out of first incredulous, then triumphant eyes.

"You know what I'll do to you, Raine, for this dirty bunch of lies you've told

about me," Sam Braddock's voice rang with triumph. "You'll be kicked out of the rangers, jailed, fined, branded as a doublecrossin' liar of the worst kind. Ott, take his guns, and lock—"

"But there's the murderer of Luke Pryor, Braddock," Raine said in a slow, hard voice.

Sam Braddock had half turned as he talked, one hand lifted to beckon Sheriff Ott Noland. His head whipped around, the grin wiped from his lips.

"More of yore lies, eh?" he rasped. "But Luke Pryor's body bein' found here in my office don't worry me none. There ain't a speck of blood in here, so any fool could see somebody sneaked Pryor's body in here after he was killed, tryin' to frame me."

"You brought Pryor's body here, aimin' to sit at that desk of yores, there, and see that nobody opened the closet door today," Raine droned. "Tonight, you aimed to sneak Pryor's remains out in the desert and bury him in a grave that likely never could be found."

"Prove it!" Braddock invited almost jauntily.

"I aim to," Raine told him calmly. "You held Luke Pryor prisoner for at least two or three days, then clubbed his brains out. There would be plenty of sign where you murdered Pryor, and I don't think yuh've had time to clean up all such sign yet, Braddock. Pryor's body bein' here in yore office, proves you held him prisoner here in town. So I'll start with that fine home Helen Shaw told me yuh'd built. I'll go over that place first, then—"

Navajo Raine never finished what he had meant to say. With a scream of stark terror, Sam Braddock leaped backwards, his hand clawing at the gun holstered beneath his coat tail.

Raine charged, smashing a fist into Braddock's fear-twisted face. Braddock rocked back, but got the gun clear, started whipping it up. Raine dived at him again, grabbing the upsweeping gun arm. But Sheriff Ott Noland had barged in, bellowing hoarsely. Navajo Raine saw the massive fist start towards him, tried to dodge without releasing Braddock's gun arm. But Noland's fist caught the ranger on the side of the head, hurled him spinning down the room.

Raine saw grizzled little Eph Somner leaping at the howling, wild-eyed sheriff, and saw that Buck Yount and Tigg Mundy were jumping away from the wall where they had stood, their practised hands diving to gun grips. Then death-tipped flame was lancing at Navajo Raine from the far side of the room, and he felt a bullet fan his cheek as he rolled groggily aside, fumbling sluggishly to pull his own guns from holsters.

A bullet scraped across the right side of Raine's face, the pain of it burning away the shock fog that had numbed him. Across the room he saw Sam Braddock behind that flaming, bucking gun. Braddock's face was a mask of trapped-animal savagery as he reached back with his free left hand, began raising a window that would let him out into an alley.

Raine came to his knees, shook long streamers of hair out of his eyes, and chopped down with his right-hand gun for a quick shot. But a bullet hit him across the left ribs a second before he fired, and he knew that he had missed even as he tumbled over backwards.

RAINE rolled to his stomach, lifted himself up with his gun-filled left hand pressed against the floor, and slid his right hand Colt forward. Sam Braddock had the window up, his left leg already across the sill. He shoved his smoking six-shooter out arm's length, taking careful aim at the crippled ranger.

Raine let the hammer of his right-hand Colt fall, and the thunder of the exploding cartridge was pierced by a scream of agony. Sam Braddock fell back into the room, and Navajo Raine was on his feet, kicking the gun out of Braddock's hand, before the tawny-eyed killer could gather his wits and fire again.

Sam Braddock cursed Raine in a strangled voice, trying to get up off the floor. But his right leg was twisted at a queer angle, and his movements wrenched another piercing scream of agony from his lips when bullet-broken bones gouged into torn flesh. Sam Braddock passed out cold, and Navajo Tom Raine turned, aware of the strange silence that lay about him. He stared for a moment, then holstered his guns and brushed long hair back from his forehead.

Tigg Mundy and Buck Yount were sitting astride Sheriff Ott Noland, who lay face down, unprotesting. Buck Yount and Tigg Mundy had six-shooters in their hands, and were grinning faintly at Navajo Raine.

"You didn't jump at the chance to arrest Buck and me when Braddock tried

to lie us into trouble, so we figgered the best we could do was give yuh a hand when yuh got into a tight, Tom," Tigg Mundy said.

"And we didn't do nothin' worse than knock this lard-bellied hellion cold with our gun barrels, either," Buck Yount grunted.

"What happened to him?" Raine asked sharply, nodding towards old Eph Somner, who lay sprawled and motionless.

"This elephant we're settin' on knocked Somner cold when that plucky little old gent tackled him," Tigg Mundy shrugged.

Raine nodded, grunting in pain as he bent to retrieve his Stetson. He glanced down at his right side as he pulled the hat on, saw that blood was soaking his shirt. Even breathing hurt, but the ranger did not think Sam Braddock's bullet had broken any of his ribs. He turned to face the doorway, where yammering townsmen were again shoving into the room.

"Some of you get a doctor in here," Raine directed. "I want Sam Braddock to hang, not bleed to death."

"Yuh're shot, ranger!" a man called excitedly.

"I'm shot, but I heal easy," Raine snapped. "What you hombres had better be thinkin' about is this thick-skulled dunce you were stupid enough to elect as yore sheriff."

Black scowls, angrily stamping feet and sizzling oaths greeted Raine's scathing remarks.

"All right, yuh did elect Noland, didn't yuh?" he lashed at them. "But mebbe yuh're not too happy about it, at that. So why don't some of yuh hustle in here, get Ott Noland and Eph Somner on their feet, and make Noland deputize Eph, then resign on the spot? That'd leave Eph Somner actin' sheriff, which means yuh'd have a capable man in office."

"By gosh, men, here's the chance we've been wantin'!" some fellow yelled. "Raine sorta scorched us with his remarks, but we had that comin' for electin' Ott Noland. And gettin' that star off Noland and onto Eph Somner is just what we've been wantin' to do."

Raine saw heads nod, saw men grinning sheepishly at them. He moved across the room to the window Sam Braddock had raised, threw a long leg over the sill, and slid outside. Raine stuck his head back into the room, looked down at Sam Braddock out of cold, green eyes.

"So long, noose-bait!" he said to the still senseless killer, then turned about and started towards the front of the building, where Wampum would be waiting patiently. He thought of Helen and Bud Shaw, and toyed with the idea of looking them up. Then he gave his head a firm shake, grinning faintly.

"Hangin' around a pretty little trick like Helen Shaw is a derned good way for an hombre to wind up wearin' apron string hobbles," he mused aloud. "And, like I told that Braddock hellion a while ago, rangers ride alone!"

NEXT ISSUE

WEST OF WINDIGO

A Railroading Novelet

By NORRELL GREGORY

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE
*F-N TEST?
*The Famous Finger Nail Test
1 "It's F-N, the test for men!" Scratch your head — if you find dryness or loose dandruff you need Wildroot Cream-Oil. Buy the large economy size.
YOUR HAIR CAN LOOK LIKE THIS WITH NEW
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL
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CREAM-OIL CHARLIE SAYS: "IT CONTAINS LANOLIN!"
3 Get Wildroot Cream-Oil from your barber or drug counter.
AND TUNE IN... "The Adventures of Sam Spade" on CBS Network every Sunday.

The Cowboy HAD A WORD for it!

By CHUCK STANLEY

"FLOWERS are the sort of things that you don't often connect with a cowboy," remarked the "Arbuckle" to the old "mossy-horn" as they got together for another discussion on the colorful language of the cowboy.

"You're plumb right," agreed the old-timer. "Maybe it's because most cowboys didn't pay too much attention to flowers until it came time for them to 'hitch-up' with one of them 'catalogue women' to settle down on a ranch of their own. Then they would go out on the range and collect up a bouquet of 'nosegays' as they called them."

"And did they have plenty of flowers to chose from?" inquired the young fellow who had now graduated from the ranks of the "tenderfoot" and "pilgrim" to the more respectable rating of "waddy" or "ranny".

"They sure did," agreed the old "maverick", "and if you can keep your seat on that old 'crowbait' there in the corral, I figure we ought to spend a pleasant afternoon."

Flowers Galore

The first flower they came across was one the Indians and cowboys had nicknamed the "broad-leaved arrow-head." This was a flower growing in muddy ground or shallow water near the sloughs. Its upper leaves were sharply arrow-shaped. It was a type of flower known as a water-plantain. Moving away from the water to the moist woodland and the willow thickets that bordered it, the "Arbuckle" spotted a flower that was familiar to him.

"There's a 'jack-in-the-pulpit'," he remarked.

"You're right," agreed his range mentor. "In the early days on the range, the roving Comanches, Cheyennes and Sioux used to find it good eating, so the cowboys dubbed it with the name 'Indian turnip.'"

The "mossback" then pointed toward the purplish-brown and greenish-yellow flowers which grew on the mottled plants of a large cabbage-shaped plant. The "greenhorn" knew that this was "skunk cabbage" or "swamp cabbage." It was so described by the cowboy because of its odor. The ill-fame of the plant was known to the cattle on the range as well as to their guardians.

Some of the cattle learned of the unpleasantness through tasting the stinging

acrid juices of the "skunk cabbage" plant. Frequently, however, it performed a service for roaming range riders in dry country, by secreting wells of rain water at the base of the grooved leafstalks.

Jointweed and Popeweed

The oldster and his companion next reined up their horses close to a clump of very small pink flowers with spikes a couple of inches long.

"Scientific folks call them plants 'persicarias'," declared the old-timer, "but if you take a look at them, you'll see that they look like a knuckle or a joint, so that was just what the cowboy figured to call them. 'Jointweed' was the first name he gave them. Some other fellows riding the prairies called them 'pink knotweeds.' There's one type of flower that looks just like the thumb of a gal, so it didn't take much imagining for your waddy to name it 'lady's thumb.'"

The young range tyro next called attention to a clump of flowers growing at the

Our Pilgrim Learns the Language of the Flowers!

edge of a thicket. It had white flowers with green centers, and pink tinted outside. It grew on a stalk from four to ten feet tall, and had dark, purplish berries.

"Sure enough," laughed the old mossy-horn. "That's yore 'pokeweed'. Most folks liked to have them around because they were the favorite fruit of the robins, flickers and downy woodpeckers, and more particularly of the wild pigeons. The cowboy found the pigeon good hunting, and named the 'pokeweed' the 'pigeon berry' plant. Some of the youngsters used to make writing fluid out of the magenta juice. To them the plant was the 'ink-berry' plant. Out in some of the rural sections where garden produce was plumb scarce, there were folks who boiled up the young shoots and ate it like asparagus."

The course of the two riders now took them down over the wasteland, and there they spotted the magenta and bright purplish crimson flowers of the "corn cockle". Because of the appearance of the flowers which resembled a miniature rose, this plant was also described as the "corn rose", and the corona-like shape also earned it the description of "crown-of-the-field." The corn name was attached to it because of its appearance in corn-fields and other grain fields where cattlemen frequently brought their cattle for fattening.

The Bouncing Bets

Nearby there was a group of pink and whitish flowers. They were about an inch across, and loosely clustered at the end of the stem. Because of the jaunty way these flowers bobbed around on their stems at the slightest breeze, the cowboy usually referred to them as "Bouncing Bets". The elder women in the cow-country liked their attractive color, and frequently used them for kitchen bouquets. They referred to them as "old maid's pink". Other descriptive terms for the same plant, commonly known as the "soapwort" were "hedge pink", "bruisewort" and "Fuller's herb."

At a nearby pond the horses were permitted to pause for water. On the far side of the water hole, cattle were grazing, and some of them were hock-deep in the cool mud. On the bosom of the water between there were large yellow pond lilies. Because of the taste some cows had for these water plants, the cowboy frequently referred to them as "cow lilies". When they were seeding and sending their seeds far and wide, he frequently called them "spatter-docks."

Meadow Buttercups

The "greener", back in the saddle, did not need the old-timer to call his attention to the meadow buttercups that were growing in profusion in one field. The bright yellow flowers grew here on stalks from two to three feet tall.

However, our range student was interested to learn that the cowboys also referred to them as "tall crowfoots" because of their shape; "kingcups" because of the story of the Indians that they were miniature gold cups left behind by the Spaniards and once used to bring drink to the King of Spain.

The name "goldcups" had a similar association. Some of the range riders who watched cuckoos darting in and out among the flowers named them "cuckoo-flowers" while one fellow who discoverd that eating the plants brought blisters to the tongue of a cow or steer called them "blister-flowers."

"You mean a cow won't eat a buttercup, either?" broke in the "Arbuckle" at this curious bit of information. The old-timer shook his head in an emphatic negative. The next flower that came to their attention was one growing in the cool, shady moist woods where they went to rest their horses against the midday sun.

Shoe-Button Plants

The plant had clusters of poisonous oval white berries with dark purple spots on the end. The old-timer explained that it was the "white baneberry" or "cohosh".

"Do you know what they look like?" he inquired.

"Just like those shoe-button eyes you'd find in a youngster's doll," replied the "pilgrim."

"That's right," agreed the maverick, "and some folks call the flowers 'dolls' eyes.' That's a name that was brought out here from New England, though."

Deeper in the woods they came to a plant with large, white, unpleasantly scented flowers. It was about a foot high, and had a fleshy, yellowish egg-shaped fruit with a good many seeds in it.

"Now there's a plant that really isn't short of names," pointed out the range mentor. "Most folks call it the 'May apple' because it blooms in May. But folks who like their bacon, whether in the cow country or on the farm, call it the 'hog apple' because it's a good feed for them hams on the hoof. One of them science fellows got hold of the flower and figured it looked like a duck's foot, so he named it the 'mandrake.' Youngsters on the ranches looked at the leaves and called the plant 'the green umbrella'. Along in July when the fruit comes out, it looks like a lemon so bingo! folks came to calling it the 'wild lemon'. Rightfully it's a barberry plant, so you can take your pick. There's apples, lemons and berries all on the same plant."

The old-timer chuckled as the youngster made his notes for future reference. They

ground-hitched the horses in the shade then, and strolled about to relax their legs. Then the older waddy pointed to a small white flower that was shaped like a change purse.

"Like you know," he remarked, "cowboys usually carried their money in a leather poke, something like a stocking, because the money was usually in silver dollars or gold pieces. But when the sheep-herders came onto the range, they carried their small change in a deep purse with a snap opening. Those flowers reminded the waddy of his 'woolly-chaser' friends so he named them 'shepherd's purses'. Some, folks was more romantic though, and figured it looked just like a human heart. So a poetic ranny dubbed them 'Mother's hearts'. You can take your choice."

On the edge of a meadow that came up to the sheltering trees, the next flowers that attracted the attention of our roving students were small white and flesh pink blooms that clustered in dense pyramids.

They grew on stems ranging from two to four feet high. This was the "meadow-sweet" a type of prairie rose. Many people who saw it from the back of a cayuse or the inside of a stage coach felt that the silhouette resembled that of a demure young lady, so cowboys referred to the plant as a "Quaker lady" or "Queen of the Meadow."

One of the more pleasant flowers from the standpoint of the cattle who grazed on it was the clover which is found throughout the

West as red clover, purple clover or honey-suckle clover. Its brother plant the white sweet clover was also in evidence all about, some of it growing on stems from three to ten feet tall. The cowboy had a couple of colorful names for this, namely "tree clover" and "honey lotus".

More Odd Blooms

Both the young waddy and the old-timer had enough of walking in their high-heeled riding boots, so they returned to their horses for the balance of their journey.

The pair rode along over an area where a prairie fire had burned through and apparently carried all of the growth with it. In this area, however, there were clumps of magenta and pink flowers of the primrose family. They grew on stems from two to eight feet high, and had curved, violet-tinted fruit from two to three inches long The old-timer described these as "willow-herbs". When looking at them from some distance, it appeared as though the bushes were on fire, so the imaginative cowboy did not take long to call them "fire-weeds".

"There's another plant that your range cattle won't have anything to do with," declared the "mossy-horn" as they jogged along and passed a dull greenish-yellow flower. "That's the wild parsnip. Some folks hereabout call it the 'madnep' because eating it is supposed to drive you crazy, like the loco-weed you hear about."

The pilgrim made a note of the appearance of the plant and made a vow not to have anything to do with it. His attention was then called to group of flesh-colored flowers with pinkish, waxy surfaces, set in clusters of several flowers. They were at the edge of some woods. The common name given to

them was pipsissewa, the Indian's description of them, while later cowboy experts, looking at the long, lance-like leaves, referred to them as "prince's pine."

"The Indians really did a good job on that flower over there," the old-timer pointed to a solitary flower with a smooth waxy, oblong bell shaped bloom on a white, scaly stalk. It resembled an Indian peace-pipe, and the brethren of the cow country named it just that, "Indian pipe."

However there were some more imaginative souls who believed that it was more like the shape of a skeleton or ghost, so it was also described as the "ghost-flower" or "corpse plant". Another more ordinary name claiming to connect the flower with a winter's icicle, described it as the "ice-plant".

Another plant growing nearby, and related to the Indian pipe was a tawny yellow, ecru, or brownish pink flower, which was also oblong and bell-shaped. It had a drooping stem. This was known commonly as the pine sap. But cowboys called it by the more colorful titles of "beech-drops" and "yellow bird's nest."

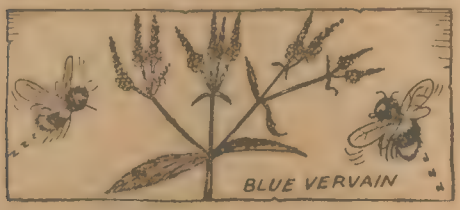
The Scarlet Pimpernel

The tenderfoot was particularly interested in the story connected with the scarlet pimpernel flowers which they found growing in the sandy soil above one of the dry river beds. The coloring of the flowers varied from scarlet to deep salmon, and copper red.

"Them there is a cowboy's barometer," explained the old-timer. "Before a storm, when the sun goes under a cloud, or on a dull day,

each one of them flowers will close up. Considering that, you can understand how-come the cowboy calls them the 'poor man's weather-glass', the 'shepherd's weather glass' and the 'shepherd's clock'. A cowboy had a habit of naming them things after sheepherders, cause he figured that with his Stetson and his poncho, the weather didn't bother him at all."

The sun was going down in the West, and the old mossy-horn and his young friend



headed back toward the ranch house. As they rode along the oldster pointed out five other plants that were favorites of the cowboys and their Eastern friends. These were the blue vervain, the mad-dog skull-cap, the self-heal, the Jamestown weed, and the scarlet painted cup.

The Helmet Flower

The blue vervain was also known as "wild hyssop" and "simpler's joy." The "mad-dog skull-cap" was a plant that had flowers resembling the old night cap, and this accounted for its name. However the cowboy had an equally descriptive name for it in the "helmet flower." This was another of the type of Western flowers that was said to be unpleasant eating for cattle, and this earned it the name of "mad-weed." The small blue flowers often grew up in the deep grass alongside the dirt roads and in the prairies.

Another flower with a varied descriptive list of names was the "self-heal." It was originally assumed by the Indians, and by early settlers to have healing qualities similar to a number of herbs, and was used for mint tea. Its purplish blue flowers also earned for it the cowboy name of "blue curls," while its heart-shape often prompted some herd-riders to describe it as "heart-of-the-earth."

Jamestown weed was the formal name of the large, showy flower known more familiarly to the ranny as the "thorn apple," the "jimson weed" and the "devil's trumpet."

The trumpet name came from the long funnel-shaped form of the flower. The fruit was a capsule shaped product in the form of an egg, and contained seeds that were a powerful narcotic poison. It was called the Jamestown weed because it was first planted in the Virginia colony of that name, and the Indians originally called it "white man's plant."

The scarlet painted cup, the last of the flowers discussed by the young "Arbuckle" and his old-timer companion before they reached the shelter of the ranch corral, was the greenish yellow flower with broad, vermillion tip, more popularly known to cowboys as the "Indian paint brush."

As the young "greener" added this flower to his notes, he felt that his day had indeed added a great deal to the lore of the cowboy and the colorful country in which he lived. But the old-timer assured him that there were still many fascinating flowers of the mountain, prairie and river to be seen in the West.

Hints About Hosses

THE best way to catch a cold and stiffen up is to take off your shirt or not put on a coat or sweater after a good lot of exercise. And so it is with a horse. Take off his saddle and blanket after he's had a good run and he'll catch cold or stiffen up. You should let his saddle blanket remain until he cools off.

How many times a day do you unbutton your coat? Loosen up your belt? Whenever you sit down in a chair or come in from out-doors. So why not loosen your bronc's saddle cinch when you get off him. When he stops to drink, give him some belly room for the water. Make things as easy for him as you do for yourself.

A man whose feet ache is usually a bad-tempered man. Shoes are plumb important! And the cayuse is just as dependent on his feet as you are. Every morning take a look-see at his hoofs. Perhaps he needs new shoes, or needs to go barefoot for a spell to toughen up his feet.

Did you ever put your tongue against a cold piece of steel, and have it stick there? Wow! Well, how do you think a horse feels when you put a cold steel bit into his mouth in the morning? Why not warm the bit up in your hands before giving him the steel? And be very careful what kind of bit you feed him. You can spoil a high-spirited pony by trying to calm him down with a cruel spade bit.

—*Bill Anson.*

Black Bart leveled his gun at the Pony Express Rider

GOLD IN THEM HILLS

By REEVE WALKER

Alamo Paige of the Pony Express meets up with California's Black Bart, and teaches him the way to write grim poetry with six-guns!

ALAMO PAIGE was crossing Coyote Creek with the Pony Express mail in the *mochilas* under his lean muscular legs. As his black racer came out of the shallow water of the ford and started up the sandy sloping bank, a resonant voice spoke with dominating clarity.

"Stand and deliver, jockey. I speak but once, so don't be a dunce."

Alamo Paige crouched in his saddle, the bridle reins held in his big left hand, his right hovering above the cap-and-ball pistol in the skin holster on his leg. That right hand raised slowly as he turned his head and saw a tall, masked bandit watching him from a clump of sagebrush.

The holdup man was clothed entirely in black. The menacing pistol in his hand did not waver. The bandit spoke again, very quietly.

"Alamo Paige, just be your age. Do not fly into a rage."

As Alamo Paige listened to the order,

the anger began to subside within him. His business was to carry the mail. While he loved a fight, the ace rider of the Pony Express knew his limitations. A man didn't argue with a cocked gun and live to fight again.

"What do you want?" Paige demanded bluntly. "I'm not carrying anything of value."

"Ah, but you are, swift messenger," the bandit contradicted. "There's gold in them thar hills, but it won't stay there. You talked with the manager of the Gold Star Mine back at Hangtown. I think you better give me the letter."

Anger darkened the rugged face of the diminutive rider. Alamo Paige was five-feet-four. He weighed one hundred and twenty pounds with pistol and issue knife. He had sworn to guard the mail with his life. The jingle jangle of the bandit's poetry was anything but soothing.

"That letter goes to Sacramento," Paige said savagely, and then his eyes widened as the tall stranger nodded agreement.

"Enough of bickering, I tire of dickering," the bandit said sharply. "Slide down from that horse before I do worse. Promptly, little man."

Seething inwardly at the slight to his size, Alamo Paige knew when he was bested. He dismounted slowly, with both hands above his tousled head. He watched the tall stranger move from the brush with the grace of a panther.

The bandit did not even remove the flat mail pouch from the saddle. He raised one corner packet of the *mochilas*, drew out a gray envelope, and bent it slightly in his long tapering fingers.

The envelope was also the writing paper, and it was shaped to form a flap that had been pasted down. The holdup man could see part of the writing without breaking the seal. He manipulated the envelope in his left hand, studied the neat writing, and replaced the missive in the *mochilas* pocket from which he had taken it.

"Through winter snows and summer heat, we carry the mail; we can't be beat," the bandit said.

After delivering his lilting rhyme, he stepped back into the undergrowth and nodded his head at Alamo Paige, motioning him to ride on with a wave of his expressive left hand.

"Proceed, courier," he said politely. "You're in a dither, so get thee thither."

Alamo Paige rubbed his head under the flat-crowned beaver hat. A man couldn't fight a cocked gun with bare hands, nor swear, for he had taken an oath which prohibited the use of profanity. The run between Placerville and Sacramento was one of the most important on the Pony Express route. The mail had to go through on time.

Paige took another look at the silent bandit, then mounted his horse. Soon he was roaring along the trail to make up the lost time. He tried to solve the puzzle as he urged the lean thoroughbred to mend the pace.

MAJORS greeted Alamo Paige when the rider ran into the station office at Sacramento. Alexander Majors was the traveling member of the firm of Russell, Majors, and Waddell. Those three names were stamped on all the gear issued to the riders of the Pony Express.

Alamo Paige threw his mail pouch on the counter and raised the corner of one packet.

"I was held up, boss," he explained bluntly. "Tall slender jigger wearing a black silk mask. He kept spouting poetry at me, but the hand that held his cocked six-shooter was plenty steady."

Majors was a big man. He was dressed in a tailored, gray cutaway coat. His hand touched the gun in his holster as he questioned Alamo Paige.

"Where did this happen?"

"About six miles after I left Placerville. I was just riding out of the ford on Coyote Creek."

"What did this bandit take?"

"Nothing," Paige replied. "He just looked at the envelope of a letter I got from the manager of the Gold Star Mine. It's addressed to the company office here in Sacramento. He didn't even open the letter."

Alamo Paige was from Texas, and he showed his fighting spirit when aroused. Majors watched while Paige imitated the actions of the bandit.

"You don't have to open the letter, boss," he told Majors. "You can see most of the writing by just squeezing the envelope into a half circle."

"Since when are we reading our clients' mail?" Majors asked coldly.

Alamo Paige flushed with guilt as he handed the gray envelope to Majors.

"Sorry, boss," he apologized humbly. "Reckon that's the monkey in me. I saw this bandit do it, and I did the same."

Alexander Majors glared sternly and took the envelope. His big head lowered as he examined the letter carefully. Then his fingers automatically compressed the envelope into a circle, and Alamo Paige hooted derisively.

"Some more monkey business," he said scathingly.

Alexander Majors had the grace to show embarrassment. His florid face flushed with shame. Then he thwacked his thigh.

"I've got the answer, Alamo," he almost shouted. "This letter tells about a shipment of gold that will leave the Gold Star Mine tomorrow."

"We don't carry gold shipments," Paige said. "Our job is to deliver the mail in spite of winter storms and—"

"Summer heat," Majors finished for him. "You say this holdup man kept spouting poetry at you?"

"Look, boss," Paige answered ironically, "when that road agent told me to go on, do you know what he said?"

"Tell me," Majors said quietly.

"Those dark eyes of his were laughing behind that mask," Paige explained. "Then he said, 'Proceed courier. You're in a dither, so get thee thither.' I climbed my hoss and hit a high lope for here."

"It was him," Majors whispered. "It certainly was."

"Yeah?" Paige said sourly. "And just who is this gent with the fancy manners?"

"Black Bart," Majors answered with positive vehemence. "He always works alone, and he always recites poetry. After he makes a haul, he usually leaves a bit of poetry behind."

"You mean California Black Bart from down around San Francisco?" Paige asked in a hushed voice. "That road agent who makes life miserable for Wells Fargo?"

"The same," Majors answered quietly. "Six feet tall, dresses in black, wears a black hat and mask, and rides a black horse."

"I didn't see his horse," Paige admitted reluctantly.

"You're tired," Majors said sympathetically. "I can't ask you to do something."

Alamo Paige stared suspiciously, then reacted as Majors knew he would.

"Who's tired?" Paige wanted to know. "Speak up, Mr. Majors. You want me to ride back and track down this bandit."

"No," Majors answered thoughtfully. "But we should send a message to the manager of the Gold Star Mine. It's a good fifty miles back there to Hangtown. There is no relief rider here at present; that is, unless you will go, Alamo."

TWILIGHT was hovering over the sage-covered hills when Alamo Paige crossed Coyote Creek on his return from Sacramento. Paige loosened his pistol in the scabbard as his horse climbed the bank at a walk. But there was no sign of the tall masked bandit.

The Gold Star Mine was a short distance from town. The Pony Express rider headed for the company office. After tying his horse to the hitching rail, Paige entered the office and spoke to a wide-shouldered man who wore the high-laced boots of a miner.

"Evening, Mr. Sanders," he greeted the superintendent. "Compliments of Mr. Alexander Majors of the Pony Express. He sent me back to have a few words with you."

"My thanks to Alexander Majors, Alamo," the superintendent answered politely. "That round trip was quite a pasear. You'll have a drink with me before we talk?"

Alamo Paige shook his head.

"You know the oath of the Pony Express," he chided Sanders. "No drinking on or off duty, and no profanity."

"I'll buy you the best dinner in town," Sanders made amends. "Must be important to bring you all the way back here. What's on your mind?"

Alamo Paige sketched his story briefly. He told of the holdup and the suspicions of Majors. Sanders listened intently, murmured that he knew of Black Bart, and he stared at a big safe along the wall.

"You can't send the gold out by the pack train," Paige said grimly.

"Eh? How did you know that?" Sanders demanded.

Alamo Paige shuffled his boots and then admitted his guilt. He told how Black Bart had read the message and how he had imitated the bandit. He confessed with a rueful smile that Alexander Majors had also read the company letter.

Sanders did not show anger as he listened. He told Alamo Paige that the gold would have to be sent down to Sacramento, but precautions would be taken. Then he suggested that they go to supper. Paige could see that the mine superintendent was worried.

After a hearty meal of fried chicken and fixings, Alamo Paige thanked Sanders

and said that he would sleep at the Pony Express station. He added that the station master in Sacramento wanted a load of firewood brought down. He would see the wood cutters in the morning.

Joe Sanders nodded absently. He was busy with the problem of transporting his gold. The two shook hands and went their separate ways. A half an hour later Alamo Paige was sleeping soundly in his bunk.

The next day Joe Sanders smiled when Alamo Paige rode down out of the wood-cutting hills and stopped at the office of the Gold Star Mine. A pack train of mine burros was waiting at the long hitching rail. Four heavily armed guards sat their horses while the loads were being fastened with the familiar diamond hitch. There were eight burros in this train. Another string of eight mine burros was tied near the office twenty yards away.

"Just the man I wanted to see," Sanders said to Paige. "I've a bunch of mail in the office to go to Sacramento and some more traveling east. The cashier will pay the usual rates. He will give you the mail."

"Thanks, Mr. Sanders," Paige said gratefully. "Five dollars a half ounce, with delivery guaranteed."

"What do you mean by 'delivery guaranteed'?" Sanders asked sharply.

Paige shrugged his square shoulders. He said he would first wait for the mules that were bringing firewood down from the hills for the Sacramento station. Sanders scowled and mounted a horse. He rode with his armed guards as the first mine pack train started down the trail toward Coyote Creek.

Alamo Paige entered the company office and winked at the grizzled old cashier. Ben Bowers had also been born in Texas. He remarked casually that two heads were better than one.

"About that mine mail for the Pony Express," Paige drawled lazily. "Five dollars a half ounce, cash at the graveside."

"I know the charges as well as you do," Bowers answered acidly. "With delivery guaranteed."

"You know, those two pack trains from the mine look alike," Paige made conversation. "You can't tell one burro from another, and the same thing goes for the Indians who herd 'em along. Do you mind telling a feller what that second string of desert canaries is going to pack to the capital?"

"Save your breath to cool your broth, jockey," Bowers growled, and then he winked at Alamo Paige. "None of your business," he added loudly, and two clerks in an inner office looked at each other and grinned.

Alamo Paige shrugged and told Bowers to take some stomach bitters for his indigestion. When the mail was brought out, he looked each letter over, took his time about making out a receipt. He pocketed the fees the old cashier shoved across the counter.

Bowers glanced through the door and complained about a noise outside.

"Keep your shirt on," Paige answered caustically. "Here comes my pack train of firewood. I'll be riding part way with them."

Paige went out and rode off with the train of firewood.

ALAMO PAIGE drew rein when he saw a horseman coming from the west at a canter. He recognized the mine superintendent. Joe Sanders stopped his horse and greeted Paige with a wide happy smile.

"Looks like I've out-smarted the poet," Sanders boasted loudly. "That bandit didn't stop us. Little good it would have done him if he had."

"You mean he didn't try to take those sacks of worthless gravel you packed out in the first pack train under guard?" Paige asked, and his rugged face expressed no emotion.

Joe Sanders jerked in his saddle, then leaned forward to stare at the Pony Express rider.

"How'd you know about that?" he demanded bluntly.

Alamo Paige shrugged. "Just put myself in the place of that bandit," he answered carelessly. "He could have hidden back there in the brush and picked those armed guards off easy. Black Bart is a dead shot and one smart hombre."

"Mebbe you know a better way," Sanders said bitingly.

"Mebbe I do," Paige answered without rancor. "Now I have got to carry the mail to Sacramento. Time's a-wasting."

"You carry the mail, and I'll get the gold out of them hills," Sanders retorted. "Don't take any fool chances if you meet up with Black Bart again."

"Likewise, and adios," Paige answered lazily.

But the laziness left him as he nicked his horse with a blunted spur and con-

tinued his westward ride.

Paige smiled and reined in his horse when he saw the first of Sanders' pack trains stretched out along the trail. Three Indians were driving the patient burros. The four armed guards were strung out with rifles in their capable hands. They called greetings to Paige, who waved a hand and trotted past the pack train without apparent interest.

The burros would cover little more than two miles an hour, taking two days for the trip from the mines to Sacramento. Alamo Paige patted the flat *mochilas* under his thighs.

It was mid-morning when he blew a blast from his little bugle and roared into the station at El Dorado. Another small rider was waiting in the office. He exchanged pouches with Paige and asked him if he ever expected to go back.

Alamo Paige grinned at the old stock question. He knew that "Pony Bob" Haslam referred to his old home in Texas. Paige countered with a remark of his own. He asked Haslam if he ever expected to amount to much. Then they stopped their banter.

"You see the poet?" Haslam asked in a whisper.

Paige shook his head and kept his voice low.

"Not yet, Pony Bob, but Black Bart is one smart hombre. Tell Mr. Majors that the firewood ought to be there tomorrow evening."

"I'd like to side you in this ruckus," Haslam said wistfully. "Now I ride back to Sacramento while you back-track to Hangtown!"

"Placerville," Paige corrected with a grin.

"Placerville to you, Hangtown to them as gets caught," Haslam retorted. "And I hope they catch up with that gun-totin' poet."

"Black Bart is smart," Paige said quietly. "He ain't ever been caught yet, but there always has to be a first time."

Pony Bob Haslam accepted his change of horses from the hostler and raced back toward Sacramento.

Alamo Paige chatted a while with the agent at El Dorado, ate a quick lunch, then said he'd be taking the western mail back to Placerville.

Soon he was riding east on a fresh horse. He frowned when he remembered the oft-repeated question with which Pony Bob Haslam greeted him.

Did he think he'd ever go back? Of course, he was now on his way back to Placerville, and he had left there that same morning. As to Texas, well, that was something else again. Little was known about the past of Alamo Paige, but there were rumors that he had once been an outlaw in the Lone Star State.

Paige never commented upon his past, and nobody asked direct questions. He was the ace rider for the Pony Express, drew top pay, and had proved his mettle.

He shrugged and rode across the sandy wasteland at a mile-eating canter, but his thoughts were of the tall bandit who left poetry at the scenes of his robberies.

Three rapid gunshots signaled the old call for urgent help. Paige raced toward a group of Indians who were waving frantically. A white man was lying in the shade of a mesquite thicket, just off the trail. Paige recognized Joe Sanders, who was holding his head in his hands.

Alamo Paige reined to a stop near the mine superintendent. A trickle of blood ran down from Sanders' scalp, but he smiled sourly at Paige and told him not to worry.

"That poet could hide behind a bunch of leaves and you'd never see him," Sanders explained sheepishly. "He belted me over the head with the barrel of his gun as I rode through a tangle. Then he made one of the redskins drive my mules up a wash while he held the others under his gun."

"More gravel?" Paige asked coldly. "I passed your first train down the road several miles."

"He got the gold with the second train this time," Sanders groaned. "It was in hundred-pound bricks, two bricks on each burro."

"Your horse?" Paige asked. "Better catch it up and ride for the law."

"Black Bart took my horse," Sanders admitted, and then he asked a favor. "You'll ride back and send out the law or notify the vigilantes?"

Alamo Paige shook his head slowly.

"I'm carrying the east-bound mail," he said grimly. "Send one of the Indians on ahead. I'll notify Ben Bowers at the mine."

"He can't get far with that metal," Sanders comforted himself, and then he shaded his eyes and stared up the trail. "Another pack train coming. Looks like those burros are loaded with firewood."

"That's wood for the Sacramento sta-

tion," Paige explained. "I went up in the hills this morning and ordered it. Tell you what I'll do," he suggested. "After I deliver the mail at Placerville, I'll bring you a horse. We can ride up that wash and hunt for sign. But I can tell you now that one or two men will never catch Black Bart."

"Hurry," Sanders urged. "I'll send an Indian on ahead. I'll wait for you in that wash. You tell Ben Bowers to notify the vigilantes."

Alamo Paige nodded and raced to meet the pack train of firewood. He spoke briefly to the Indian leader, then he was racing toward Placerville fifteen miles to the east.

BEN BOWERS was standing in the public square, talking earnestly to a crowd of bearded miners. Bowers had summoned a meeting by beating on a tire iron suspended from a chain. The miners were heavily armed. Alamo Paige watched their faces as he listened to Ben Bowers.

"This holdup gent is known as Black Bart," Bowers told the group. "He held up our pack train near Wild Turkey Wash. He buffaloed Joe Sanders over the skull with a shooting iron. It's almost sundown now. We've got enough daylight to get there if we ride fast. We won't need a rope. Shoot to kill if you see Black Bart. There's a reward of a thousand dollars if we recover the gold."

Alamo Paige rode with the vigilantes as they roared out of town. He had delivered the east-bound mail, and his time was his own until noon the next day. There were fifteen grim-faced men in the posse.

They met Joe Sanders near Wild Turkey Wash just as the light was fading. Sanders waved them down. He held a crumpled paper in his right hand.

"He's got away for now, men," Sanders shouted. "The burros came back an hour ago, which means Black Bart has buried the gold in the hills somewhere."

"He leave you a message?" Paige asked curiously, glancing at the paper in the superintendent's hand.

"Poetry," Sanders answered with a grimace. "But we'll get him tomorrow!"

"Read that there poetry, boss," a bearded miner urged. "She might give us a clue."

Joe Sanders squirmed and cleared his throat. Alamo Paige leaned forward to listen carefully as Sanders began to read from the paper.

> I love this land with its rock and rills,
> I've hid your gold in them thar hills;
> I'll take it out as I roam and travel,
> You can't fool Black Bart with worthless gravel.

"He's got you there, Joe," Ben Bowers chided Sanders. "That first pack train loaded with trash didn't fool Black Bart."

Alamo Paige listened with a grim smile tugging at his mouth. Sanders said he had traveled three miles up Wild Turkey Wash. He suggested that they ride back to town. The light was failing fast. Bowers mounted behind Alamo Paige and rode double back to Placerville.

"You could earn a thousand dollars reward if you could find that gold, Paige," he told the Pony Express rider.

"I get paid for carrying the mail," Paige answered. "I leave at noon tomorrow for Sacramento. But I'll take off a little early and see what I can see."

Alamo Paige ate an early dinner next day. He was ready to take the west-bound mail when the rider raced into the Placerville station. He threw the *mochilas* on his saddle, vaulted aboard, and started the fast run to Sacramento.

After crossing Coyote Creek, Paige scanned the country ahead as he raced across the sage-covered land. It was high noon when he galloped up Wild Turkey Wash. He had the feeling that he was being watched when he reined to a stop and reached inside his buckskin shirt.

Paige dismounted near a large flat boulder, smoothed out the paper he had taken from his shirt, and laid it on the flat rock. He weighted the corners with chucks of shale, leaped to his saddle, and raced out of the wash at breakneck speed.

As he came to the main trail, Paige glanced back over his shoulder. A smile tugged at the corners of his hard mouth when he saw a tall black-clad figure step from the heavy brush and approach the paper on the rock.

Fighting duels was not part of his job, Alamo Paige told himself. He grinned as he recalled the many fights he had fought to protect the mail, but this was something different. Black Bart was the smartest highway man in California, yet there was no record of the robber ever killing any one in his many holdups.

This, Paige told himself, was a battle of wits. He saw the tall bandit pick up the

paper from the rock, and after reading it slowly, Black Bart whirled and drew his six-shooter.

Alamo Paige waved his hand mockingly. He was a quarter of a mile away and safely out of range. The lips of Alamo Paige moved to repeat the first poem he had ever written, and one which Black Bart had just read.

Take your knife and cut the gold.
While precious time it flitters.
You will find, my lanky friend,
All is not gold that glitters.

Alamo Paige knew that his efforts did not make good poetry. But he also had his private opinion about the doggerel written by Black Bart. He would leave the puzzle with the bandit. He knew that Black Bart would not be long in finding the answer.

TWILIGHT hovered over the sage-covered plains when Alamo Paige overtook his pack train carrying the firewood for the Sacramento station. There were twelve burros in the train, with four Indians to herd them along. The lead burro was rounding a bend on the river trail as Paige rode up to the rear.

The Indians called greetings and smiled at the rider on the thoroughbred horse. The patient burros plodded along, nodding their heads. The pack train stopped when a single shot rang out in the still air. Alamo Paige raced forward when he heard what was by now a familiar command.

"Stand and deliver. Keep your hands high."

Alamo Paige drew his pistol as he raced around the bend. He recognized the deep voice of Black Bart, who must have taken a short-cut known only to himself. Then he saw the bandit mounted on a tall, black thoroughbred. And Black Bart saw Paige!

Two pistols roared at the same time. The flat beaver hat was snatched from the head of Alamo Paige. He saw the bandit jerk in the saddle and almost fall. Black Bart's horse leaped high and raced toward the north.

Alamo Paige followed like a hound after a rabbit, crouching along the neck of his horse, urging the animal to top speed. He groaned as the distance widened between them. He told himself that he had never seen a horse show so much speed and stamina as Black Bart's. After a half mile, Paige reined in his bronc and gave up the chase.

His narrowed eyes saw blood spots in the trail. The bandit's wound was not vital, for Paige's ball had struck Black Bart in the left shoulder. Alamo Paige rode slowly back to the pack train, which had now started moving slowly along the river trail.

Paige spoke reassuringly to the Indians, informing them that Sacramento was perhaps two miles away. Then he saw a group of horsemen riding toward him, urging their horses into a dead run. Paige rode to the head of the train, and he held up his hand when he recognized Alexander Majors and Joe Sanders. The other four men were the guards who had escorted the worthless gravel to Sacramento from Placerville.

"Alamo, you all right?" Majors shouted as he reined in his lathered horse.

"I need a new hat is all," Alamo Paige answered, and he thrust a finger through the double holes in his flat beaver. "What's all the excitement about?"

"We heard the shooting," Majors answered. "We knew it was about time for you to get in with the mail, and we thought perhaps Black Bart had held you up again."

"He tried to hold up the pack train," Paige explained without excitement. "I came faunching up from the rear, and Black Bart and I both shot at the same time. Got him through the left arm, I think," he added grimly.

"What in time would Black Bart want with a load of firewood?" Sanders asked curiously. "He got our gold. That ought to satisfy him."

"No," Paige contradicted quietly, "Black Bart didn't get any gold, Sanders." He took a deep breath and a wide smile spread across his rugged face. "Me and old Ben Bowers rigged a deal on you, Sanders," he told the mine superintendent.

"You and Ben?" Sanders repeated. "You mind telling me how?"

"Ben cast some lead ingots just the size of those gold bricks," Paige explained. "Ben gilded those lead bricks with some gold paint, and we loaded them on the burros in the second train. Those are the bricks Black Bart took back in the hills. The real gold bricks are on these burros under the firewood, but it looks like Bart found out his mistake."

"Just two miles from Sacramento, and he would have had the gold shipment if you hadn't come along in time," Sanders whispered. "I'll see that you get the thou-

sand-dollar reward."

"Turn it over to Mr. Majors," Paige answered quietly. "It can go in the fund for our crippled riders. That Black Bart is the smartest hombre I ever met."

"How come you to throw off your shot, Alamo?" Majors asked bluntly. "You could have killed him!"

Alamo Paige shook his head.

"In all his holdups, I've never heard of Black Bart killing a man," he answered simply. "And my horse was running and rearing."

The Indians began talking among themselves, pointing to a rider coming from the north. He was riding the horse Joe Sanders had lost back in Wild Turkey Wash. The Indian rode right up to Alamo Paige and handed him a paper.

"White man in black say bring this paper to you," he told Paige. "Him not hurt bad. Say give you talking paper."

"You're the Indian Black Bart made drive the burros up the wash and into the hills," Sanders said with a frown, and then he turned to Paige, who was grinning as he read the talking paper. "What'd that blasted bandit say this time?" he demanded.

Alamo Paige cleared his throat and winked at Alexander Majors. Then he read aloud from the paper.

Alamo Paige:
You little runt, you should be dead,
The gold you traded was so much lead.
The wood you bought was treasure borne,
While I am poor and quite forlorn.
You win reward, I'm full of ills,
But there's gold for all in them thar hills.
Respectfully, Black Bart.

Alamo Paige folded the paper and thrust it into the front of his shirt.

"I'm glad he respects me," he said with deep satisfaction. "I'll see you gents in Sacramento. I've got to get this mail in, on account of we always guarantee safe delivery."

Next Issue's Headliners!

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WHEN Tennessee Vard returns to Broken Buttes he finds himself the target of suspicion—and even his own father, who is the local sheriff, regards him as an outlaw. That puts a big job up to Tennessee—he's got to clear himself and pin down the miscreants who are really guilty of the crimes attributed to him. How he goes about this tough chore makes LONGRIDER GUNLAW, the novelet by Nels Leroy Jorgensen in our next issue, one of the most gripping Western yarns you've ever read!

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FOLLOW the fighting trail of Pole Cawhorn, railroad law officer, as he battles to clean up a sinister crew that impedes the progress of the iron horse—in WEST OF WINDIGO, by Norrell Gregory, a railroading novelet that packs a trainload of thrills! It's in the next issue—together with many other smashing stories and features by your favorite writers.

THE TRIGGER FINGER WRITES

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

The citizens of High Mesa needed Hack Lawton's help—yet, strangely, if he gave it, he would lose their friendship!

THROUGH no immediate fault of his own, "Hack" Lawton saw the end of his days of peace. After four quiet years in High Mesa, gunsmoke again stung his nostrils, and the bark of Colts echoed in his ears.

Standing inside the window of the office of his horse and mule barn, he saw the robbery of the Stockman's Bank, watched it with a growing excitement mixed with a sad resignation, for once again his trigger finger itched and the smell of burning powder set his nerves a-tingle.

He knew he was going to destroy his hope of continued peace, and yet he knew further that it could be no other way. For the people of High Mesa had become his friends. But now, if he were to help them in their time of need, it would be at the cost of that friendship. But it had to be.

In front of the bank three saddled horses were being held by an armed masked man. Two other masked men were tying heavy saddlebags abaft their cantles while another, with two smoking guns, was holding back surprised, unarmed citizens, who might interfere with the robbers' getaway.

Hack Lawton's eyes narrowed thought-

fully as he took in the panorama. He saw the weakness in the robbers' plan, and it was that weakness he would attack.

Lawton reached into the bottom drawer of his roll-top desk and brought out an old pistol in a pliable black holster. Although it had been four years since he had worn that gun, he had kept it oiled and cleaned and loaded. He strapped it on regretfully, and stepped out into the street.

The citizens who had headed toward the bank at the first sound of shots were backed up across the corner and herded in front of the Longhorn Restaurant. Caught by surprise, they were helpless before the bandit guns.

Hack Lawton measured the distance to the robbers, and it was a long shot for much certainty of success, particularly for a man who had not pulled a trigger in more than four years. But now the robbers had their loads secure and were preparing to mount their panicky horses. In a moment it would be too late.

Lawton shot carefully, steading his Colt across his left arm. His first shot took off the hat of the mounted man holding the horses, passed on and broke the window over the heads of the men in front of the restaurant.

THE second shot knocked the man off his horse, sprawling him into the dust. All the horses bolted instantly, running down the street with the money-bags bouncing on the saddle-skirts. The man standing guard on the ground saw Hack Lawton coming down the dusty street. His bullet whined past Lawton's ear, but he did not break his stride.

Bareheaded, he came on, an impressive figure, the six feet of him, young, tall and broad-shouldered, with the sun glinting on his copper hair. Many in High Mesa really saw the quiet, self-confident strength of him for the first time. For Hack Lawton was fighting alone, while a good third of the townspeople stood as near to safety as they could get, and watched him.

Now the three bandits were spread out in the street in front of him, the one man whose lone gun stood between them and escape. The old thrill of battle crept into Hack Lawton's blood as he faced their guns, but it was with the unhappy knowledge that he was shooting away the foundations of his existence. . . .

He had withheld his fire since he had unhorsed the first man, hoping to get closer and make his few shots count. For when his six shells were gone there would be time for no more loading, and there were between eighteen and thirty-six shells against him. His lone cylinder of shells *had* to count.

He went forward through the dust on slow, light feet, his eyes shifting from right to left toward the three bandits, watching for the first evidence of their attack. There was a moment of tense silence—then it came with cyclone fury and from all guns at once. The air was full of lead, the roar set the dust dancing before his eyes.

He sidestepped, his gun barked, and the bandit on his left went down. But a slug got him and threw him down in the dust, on his back. Dizzily he rolled over, and little geysers of dust jumped up into his eyes. They were pouring lead at him, determined he should not get up.

He twisted around and lay flat in the hot dust. Since he now could not avoid those bullets, all he could do was return the bandits' fire until one of them got him, or until his remaining five shells were gone.

He couldn't see well, but he fired. He did not see a man fall, so he fired again. Still a man did not fall. The bullet went through the hardware store window and knocked over a stack of shiny zinc buckets.

He was worried. He was not shooting like the old Hack Lawton. He was taking a licking. And if he didn't get those two remaining men with his two remaining shells, the town was going to be in bad shape. Those bandits had horses loose with stolen money on them, and nobody else in town seemed able to swap a shot with them.

He made his play, and he was losing. Not only the fight, but much more. It was a bitter pill to take.

And then it didn't matter. A slug hit him with the weight of a ton of lead, and he went to sleep in the hot sand in the middle of the street. . . .

When Hack Lawton woke up, he was lying on a cot in Doc Burnham's front room, with a bandage on his head and another around his chest, and there was a strong smell of antiseptics about him.

He was staring blankly at a canary bird in a cage hanging from the window frame above him.

Another man lay on another couch, and the doctor and the sheriff were both sitting in old rocking chairs, smoking and apparently waiting for something. Old Doc seemed uncomfortable.

Sheriff Link Baxter was the first to see that Hack was looking around.

"How yuh feelin', son?" he asked cordially.

Hack was not feeling so well, and he said so.

"Looks like I kind of fizzled out on the job I took on, don't it?" he asked.

"Well, yuh done good," the sheriff answered. "Yuh winged this hombre and killed another for us, and stampeded the hosses so we got the money back. But two of the bandits got down to yore barn and took a couple of yore hosses and lit out of town. Me, I kind of let myself get caught in the bank, and they locked me in the vault till somebody got Miss Minerva, the bookkeeper, out of her sick bed to come down and let me and the bank help out. Yuh're about the only one that done anything. They shot Beeler, the janitor, pretty bad."

"I should of hit them other two," Hack said. "It was just plain pore shootin'."

THE next voice came from the bandit who apparently had not been asleep.

"That's worse shootin' than yuh ever done down on the Border when yuh was the Mad Dog," he said. "Since when have yuh turned on yore own kind and started sidin' the law?"

Now it had come, the revelation of which Hack Lawton had lived in fear for so long. He had hoped that High Mesa would not learn this about him, that he could keep it secret forever.

Old Doc Burnham studied the end of his cigar. The sheriff gave his attention to rolling a cigarette. The bandit sat up on his couch, and his dirty, unshaven face was evil. His eyes were on Hack Lawton and contempt twisted his ugly face.

"If it hadn't been for you, we'd of made it," he accused. "But Tug Grimes made it, and he ain't one to drop a thing like that. I reckon this town'll be proud to know that it's got the Mad Dog as one of its leadin' citizens, won't it?"

Hack Lawton felt the blood drain from his face. He glanced quickly at the doctor and Sheriff Baxter, and saw that they were as uncomfortable as he was, to judge by the red around their necks and ears.

There could be no doubt in Hack's mind that they had both heard about the "Mad Dog." For the name had become a legend when the Mad Dog had disappeared. Hack had often listened to wild tales of the Mad Dog's prowess, stories with no basis of fact, and had been secretly amused.

The sheriff fidgeted, then made his little play. He was not subtle about it, but Hack appreciated it.

"I ain't never heard of yuh bein' the Mad Dog," the sheriff said, "so I reckon this hombre is out of his head. Wouldn't you think the same, Doc?"

"Yes, a wounded man's mind is likely to have wanderin's. Just forget it, Hack."

Hack managed to sit up, though there were pains from his head to his hips. He got his booted feet on the floor and started reaching for the makings. He had no shirt on, and the sheriff handed him his Durham and papers. Hack rolled the cigarette with deliberate slowness, thinking out his words in advance.

"Thanks, gents," he said then, "but this hombre is right. They did use to call me that name, though I don't know how this feller recognized me. I don't remember seein' him before, but that don't matter. He's right."

"That don't make no difference to us," Baxter said. "Yuh been a good citizen here, and now yuh've put us in yore debt. I ain't one to look far into the past. If there ain't a warrant against yuh, yuh ain't a criminal."

"Others might feel different," Hack said. "I figger I owe yuh an explanation, if yuh'll listen."

"Forget it," Doc said.

"Nope." Hack shook his head, and went on doggedly. "I got that name down on the Border when I was a kid workin' for one of two big outfits that was fightin' each other. Us riders was all the Law there was for a man to protect himself with, so it was honest work. I was fast with a gun—too fast, I reckon. That's why my enemies tacked that name onto me.

"Little people got hurt when they got in the way. There was a case of a little squatter that got burned out by bein' between the big boys. We caught him stealin' a calf, and I shot it out with him. I was so fast, I don't reckon he had much of a chance.

"Anyway, I accidentally heard that his family was hungry, with him gone, so I went out to see 'em. They was livin' in a little pole cabin, the mother and three kids, and they was ragged and half-starved. I never saw such a pitiful sight. And there I was, that had killed their old man because he was takin' a calf to feed them poor kids, and takin' it from an outfit that had already burned his whole crop off his land. It made me sick.

"Anway, I gave 'em all the money I had in my pocket, went out and killed 'em another calf off my boss' land, and hightailed it out of there. That explains the disappearance of the Mad Dog. I swore I'd never pull another trigger as long as I lived, and I wouldn't have, if these robbers hadn't made

me forget what I promised myself.

"Yuh see," Hack finished, embarrassed, "I come here with a bad rep behind me, and you folks took me in without question and gave me a chance to live quiet and peaceful. I figgered I owed yuh somethin' for that, and I tried to pay yuh the only way I could. That makes us square. I'll be gettin' on as soon as I'm able to ride."

SHERIFF BAXTER'S cigarette had burned his finger before he broke his silence.

"Forget it," he said. "In this country, lots of folks has a past they don't like to remember. Folks won't think about it."

"Yes, they will," Hack said. "I've tasted it before, when I was tryin' to find a place to settle. I'll be driftin'."

The doctor's wife, who was post-mistress, came in.

"Mr. Beeler is worse," she said to her husband. "His wife said could you come down right away? She's afraid he's dying."

The doctor got his hat and bag and went out onto the porch. He beckoned to the sheriff, who followed him. Then the doctor spoke in a low voice.

"Lawton's story kind of checks with a little mystery that's been puzzlin' my wife ever since he's been here. Yuh won't repeat it, will yuh, if I mention it?"

"Naturally. What is it?"

"Well, Ma has got a woman's curiosity, though a post-mistress ain't supposed to have. Anyhow, ever since Lawton came here, he's been sendin' a money order to a woman down in Borderville, but without no return address on it. Well, Ma's sister happens to live down there and, like a woman, Ma wrote her sister to find out who this woman was, thinkin' to unearth some kind of romance, I reckon. Know who that woman was?"

"How would I know?" the sheriff grinned. "I don't tamper with the U. S. Mail."

"It's a poor old woman that is the widder of a nester that was shot by a young gun hand they called the Mad Dog. Now does that add up?"

The sheriff whistled under his breath, then looked queerly at the doctor before commenting.

"I thought I'd seen everything," he said slowly. "But a young feller supportin' the family of a man he killed, and had a kind of right to kill—" He rubbed his forehead. "Yuh shore can't know a man by what his enemies say about him, now can yuh?"

"I just thought yuh'd like to know," the doctor answered, and hurried off to answer his call.

The sheriff went back into the doctor's house, got the bandit and, despite his wound, headed him down toward the adobe jail, leaving Hack Lawton to sit in the ruins of the new life he had built, studying the caged canary and wondering what to do next.

He had lived too much during his twenty-four years, and a deep-seated weariness in him was just beginning to wear off when this new trouble came up.

An orphan from his earliest remembrance, he had been kicked from one cowtown to another until he had got old enough to take care of himself, by hiring out as a gun hand. This had made him cynical, an attitude he had cultivated to hide his loneliness.

When he had finally found the way to peace, by coming here and opening a feed and livery stable, he had tasted for the first time the rewards of living other than by the gun.

It had been good, a thing worth clinging to. But now—

He picked up a slim book off the center table and opened it, trying to get his mind off his own bleak future while waiting for Doc to return. It was a book of verses, one verse on each decorated page. His eyes ran over one of them, though the words hardly registered in his tortured mind.

> The moving finger writes, and having writ
> Moves on; nor all your Piety nor Wit
> Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line . . .

That's me, he thought. I drew gun wages once, so they wrote me down as a gunman, and I'll never be able to cancel that as long as I live.

He lay back down on the cot and closed his eyes. . . .

In two weeks following the killing, Hack Lawton's strength slowly returned. He sat around his livery and sales stable, and the town settled down to a kind of uneasy quietude, broken only once by excitement.

The jailed bandit caught Sheriff Link Baxter off guard one night when he brought the man's supper. The bandit slugged him, grabbed his gun, stole a horse and disappeared. Then things were quiet again, but uneasy.

Baxter tried to resign, but there was nobody to take his place, so he stayed. He got a scrawled letter from the bandit leader, "Tug" Grimes. Grimes promised to return soon and do the job properly, along with paying his respects to the sheriff and the re-

formed killer who had broken up his first robbery.

"Grimes is a bad man, one of the worst," Baxter told Doc Burnham. "And he's one of the conceited kind that'll come back just to prove how tough he is. I ain't afraid of him, but I'm old, and I admit I ain't the man I used to be. We need a younger man in my job."

"You'll do," Burnham assured him. "Grimes is just bluffin'. He'd be too smart to come back."

"That's just what he thinks we think," Baxter said.

He didn't try to resign again. Instead, he went down to the livery barn.

"Hack," he said, "yuh're the best man with a gun in these parts. Grimes may come back like he threatens to do. We need a good gun hand for a deputy."

"I got a man comin' in tomorrow to buy me out," Hack Lawton interrupted. "I won't be here."

"Now look here, feller," the sheriff protested. "Yuh're too touchy about yore past. Nobody thinks yuh're an outlaw."

"Yes, everybody thinks so," Hack answered bitterly. "I been watchin' the people here. They used to like me, used to be friendly. Yuh can see that friendliness freezin' up in their veins. They've already changed from 'hello' to a cool 'howdy,' and then to just a nod. Nope, Sheriff, thanks a lot, but I'm travelin'."

That was the excuse he gave Sheriff Baxter. And it was part of the reason he had decided to move on. But it was not the whole reason.

He had made an unpleasant discovery lying in the dust of the road, trading shots with Grimes and his men. The fact was that the call of the gun was still in his blood. The smell of gunsmoke had been a stimulant to him, and he had reacted to the sound of battle like a birddog at the sight of a shotgun.

He knew Grimes was coming back, and that if he stayed here and went through one more fight, the craving for the excitement of gun battle would be too much for him. At whatever cost, he had to avoid it.

But he could not tell this to the sheriff as they sat in the sun in front of the livery barn.

"It's too bad," the sheriff said after a spell. "We need yore gun here mighty bad right now."

"Mebbe," Hack answered tightly. "But I said I was through with guns, and I mean it. I should never have butted into that bank fight."

The sheriff got up, looked at him queerly, and left without another word.

The sheriff had not been gone long when Doc Burnham came down to the stable to hire a wagon.

"I've got a load of stuff to take out to Beeler's widow," he told Hack. "He died that night before I got there, yuh know. We've moved her and the kids out to a little place on the creek where there's room for a garden patch and pig and cow and some chickens. I'd like to get yuh to help me get some stuff out there."

The stuff which Hack and the doctor picked up at various places in town told its own story. There were some old quilts, some children's clothes, and some fruit jars of food, a sack of meal, and one of flour. There were several dried-apple boxes of assorted groceries. And there were three young shoats, some chickens and eggs, and an old coal-oil incubator.

Hack loaded them, and he and the doctor started out, leading an old red milk cow behind the wagon.

"Those are honest folks," Doc said as they approached the shack. "Old Beeler wasn't much account, but with even him gone, they're helpless. And through no fault of their own. It happens that Beeler was the only man besides you that tried to oppose the bandits. He threw his mop at 'em, and they shot him for his trouble. It's the innocent that always suffer when bullets fly."

The widow of the janitor of the bank was a work-worn woman, hollow-chested, and with lines of worry etched deep on her face. Her boy and two girls were lean and in threadbare clothes, their eyes wide and staring, with the look of those who are chronically hungry. The oldest child, a girl, was hardly twelve years old.

The children were excited as they unloaded the stuff. The faded woman stood bareheaded under a locust tree, her hands clenched, and embarrassment written on her thin face.

Hack got the older girl to help him take the crate of chickens to a sway-backed old shed made of rusted, flattened-out lard cans. Before they returned to the wagon, he stopped her and thrust a twenty-dollar bill into her hand.

The girl looked at it with widening eyes, then back at him.

"It's yores," he said. "Just don't say anything about it."

The girl tried to speak, stammered, but no words came. Then she started crying, turned, and ran toward her mother.

Old Doc Burnham saw it all out of the

corner of his eye, but did not let on, busy taking the last box out of the wagon.

Hack was silent all the way back to town. And when he got there, he learned that Grimes had struck. He had brought four men this time, swooped down on the bank and robbed it.

SHERIFF LINK BAXTER had been decoyed out of town by a fake tip that the bandits had been seen at Willow Creek Crossing, and the lawman had ridden out to investigate. When he got back and found out what had happened, he had immediately set out with a posse.

Hack and Doc got this news from the hostler while they were unhitching. Before they were through, a man came riding into town, his sweaty horse pounding up the dust to Doc Burnham's door, where he slid off his saddle. He dashed indoors, then came out again and headed for the livery barn.

"Quick, Doc!" the man shouted. "Grimes is holed up at the old Nixon place. They've killed two of the posse already and shot Baxter bad. Better bring a spring wagon to bring him back in."

Hack had his team changed to the spring wagon. While the animals were being watered and hitched, he went into his office and opened his desk drawer. He looked long at the gun in it before he picked it up.

But he did pick it up, and strapped it on. And there was a tightness in his chest which hurt him more than his half-healed wounds. This was what he had been afraid of. He was taking up the gun again, and he had the feeling that he would not again lay it away. He had the feeling of a man walking to the scaffold.

The words he had seen in the book back in Burnham's office came back to him, throbbed through his brain with a steady rhythm:

> The moving Finger writes, and having writ,
> Moves on . . .

He had tried to cancel this thing from his life, but it would not cancel.

He went out and got into the wagon.

They whipped the mules out to the abandoned Nixon ranch, where the posse was scattered back of a field of boulders, facing a lone adobe shack backed up against a bluff. The old shack was a bullet-proof fortress, with one small window covered with greased wrapping paper instead of glass. It was practically impregnable, yet giving Grimes and his men safety to shoot from behind the paper window cover at any posseman's head that became exposed.

Baxter lay under a sycamore tree back out of gun range. Hack drove the doctor there, and Burnham examined the sheriff's wound. He shook his head when he sent one of the men to the spring for water.

"He won't die, but his hip's broken. He'll be crippled for life."

Tesdale, the banker, came up, a lean, worried man with a rifle under his arm, and heard the verdict.

"Do everything you can for him, Doc, and I'll see that it's paid for. The town owes him more'n that."

"It's too bad," Burnham answered. "He never wanted the job, but just took it because the town needed him. He knew he wasn't a match for Grimes, but he came anyway. I don't know what we're goin' to do without him."

"We're in a tough spot now," Tesdale said. "Grimes is holed up here and none of us can get him out. After dark, he'll be able to get away, and he's got practically every dollar of the bank's money in gunny-sacks there with him. Baxter tried to rush the place, and this is what it got him. I don't know what we're going to do."

Hack Lawton hardly heard the banker, for he was studying the layout of the little group of buildings. Besides the small adobe house with the single door and window in front, and its chimney at one end, there was a lean-to shed at the other end, with old black tar-paper nailed on it, to make it windproof, and farther back there was a pole barn and a corral.

He looked at the sun and judged it to be an hour before sundown. That left little time for them to rout the bandits out before dark.

He looked at the scattered posse, hiding behind the field of sandstone rocks and cactus clumps. They were men who had not worn weapons for years, and men who'd never used a pistol before, but who had new weapons, and were handling them with an awkwardness which denoted as much fear of their own guns as of those of the bandits.

It was not a determined posse, and it had no experienced leadership. It stood little chance of bringing Grimes in.

"If you'll just ask the men to hold their fire till they're shore of what they're doin'," Hack said to Tesdale, "I'll have a try at rootin' Grimes out."

Apparently the banker had learned of Hack's refusal to act as deputy, and he looked at him queerly.

"All right," he said. "Anything is better than nothing, and that's what we're doing now."

HACK made his way around the side of the adobe shack, keeping clear of the window through which Grimes and his men had been doing their damage. Coming up on the side of the shack supporting the lean-to, he saw that he could reach its wall, for there was neither door nor window there.

He set to work swiftly. He picked up an old washboard and tossed it onto the roof of the lean to. He ripped the tar-paper off the walls and made a large pile of it on the roof. Then climbed up on it.

Standing on the lean-to, he piled the tar-paper on the roof of the adobe house. He heard cursing inside, but knew that none of the bandits could get him through the sod roof.

He struck a match, touched it to a strip of the tar-paper, and held it until it was burning fiercely, pouring off a thick black smoke. He stuffed the burning paper down the adobe chimney and hurriedly shoved the rest of the black paper down over it. Then he capped the chimney with the old washboard, so that the smoke would not pour out upward.

Standing on the flat roof, above the front door, he waited. He did not have long to wait.

At first he heard cursing and coughing as the smoke poured into the cabin and the bandits tried to get at the fire in the flue to extinguish it. He heard a bull voice order someone to get that stuff out of that chimney.

"I can't, Tug!" came the reply. "I can't reach it, an' the smoke's chokin' me."

Then there was a ripping sound as the bandits tore off the greased paper window covering, to get fresh air. Thick black smoke poured out of the cabin.

But the opening was not enough to clear out the smoke, nor to let in sufficient fresh air. The men could not stay in the suffocating room many more moments.

Hack Lawton stood poised over the front door, waiting.

Then they came out. They came running, Grimes, the escaped bandit, and two others. And they came with eight guns in their hands.

Hack Lawton jumped. He landed on the ground in the midst of the coughing and sputtering bandits. And he was there to kill.

He was backed up against the thick wall beside the door, shooting with slow deliberation at the weaving and panicky bandits. But it was a mechanical thing with him, and he hardly knew that he was shooting, or that his own skin was absorbing a lot of lead.

Instead, his mind was detached, as though it were far away, and he was thinking of other things, as a drowning man is said to do in his last moments.

It was coming to him now that Doctor Burnham had deliberately taken him out to the widow's house to show him that the people of the community had to stick together. The widow didn't amount to much, but people had to help her because she was one of them. Somebody had to protect people like that.

Baxter knew he was no good with a gun, but he had taken the job, and would be crippled for life, because he owed it to his community to do the job he was best fitted to do. But he, Hack Lawton, whom the community had accepted, had turned them down in their hour of need. He was here, he thought, because that gun urge in his blood would not let him avoid a showdown fight with Grimes.

Then suddenly a new idea came to him as he stood back against the wall and felt lead burning into his body. The idea fell into place with the others and made a pattern, like a jig-saw puzzle fitting itself together before his eyes.

A gun was not a bad thing—nor a good thing. It was only an instrument. It was the man behind the gun that was good or bad. Baxter, using a gun, was good, because he had used it for the good of others. While he, Hack Lawton, doing the same thing, was using it not for the good of his neighbors, but to satisfy some urge to outshoot Grimes. This was bad.

It was as bad as those two remaining men standing facing him. He saw them through a haze, and their faces were evil, and their guns were things of evil. He did not like them.

Now he knew what he had been searching for all these years. Now he could use a gun as a tool with which he could help others. To destroy those who would harm his friends and his neighbors. That would be good. Now he could use a gun without a sense of guilt, yes, even with a sense of pride.

He had been fighting instinctively, but now saw that Grimes was the only one standing before him. Two men were dead, and the escapee was down on his knees, trying to get in a last shot before he collapsed.

BUT Hack Lawton was also down. He had slid down the wall until he was sitting with his back to the adobe building,

and the black smoke from his tarpaper stuffing in the choked chimney was pouring out all around him. It was this smoke haze which had helped a little in keeping him alive.

The half-down man got in his shot, and it knocked Hack flat on the ground. Hack lay there and shot the man in the head. Then looked back at Grimes.

Grimes, fanatic in his rage at the man who had twice thwarted him, was running toward Hack, his black face contorted with hatred, blood on his bald scalp and a curse on his lips, intent on filling his enemy with lead.

Hack Lawton was so weak now that he could not raise his gun arm. He propped up the barrel end of the weapon with his left hand and pulled the trigger.

His last slug blew a hole in Grimes' chest, and the bandit's momentum carried him on dead feet until he came on and fell squarely on top of Hack Lawton.

Hack did not have the strength to roll the man's body off him. Doc Burnham and Tesdale did that when the posse came rushing up after the fight was over. Burnham stretched Hack out on his back away from the smoky doorway into which Tesdale had gone in search of the bank loot.

"Yuh'd better hire me to dig lead out of yuh on a yearly basis," Doc said and grinned. "It'd be cheaper wholesale."

"How's Baxter?" Hack asked.

"Restin' easy after I gave him a shot, but that's all. He don't know yet that a shattered hip is a pretty serious thing for an old man. He won't be able to work any more." Doc Burnham shook his head.

"I was just wonderin'," Hack asked speculatively. "Yuh suppose the people would consider me doin' his work for the rest of his term? If they didn't mind, I could mebbe keep the peace around High Mesa."

"And I was just thinkin'," Doc Burnham said, "that if yuh turned the job down when we offered it to yuh this time, we'd ought to ride yuh out of town on a rail."

"Yuh won't have to." Hack grinned. "I like a little softer saddle than that."

Roundup of Best Western Yarns

WALT SLADE, the fighting Texas Ranger known as El Halcon, rides again in RINGING STEEL—an exciting complete novel by Bradford Scott featured in the March issue of THRILLING WESTERN. In the same issue those rollicking range waddies, Swap and Whopper, cut some uproarious capers in Syl MacDowell's novelet, HAYWIRE HOMBRES. Many other novelets and stories in a gala number!

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EVERYBODY likes a good railroading yarn—and one of the best in many years is WHISTLE OVER THE PLAINS, the complete book-length action novel by Edward Churchill featured in the March issue of WEST. Also in the same issue, a Zorro thriller by Johnston McCulley and many others.

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Kneeling behind the planks on the raft, Gregg worked his Winchester, sending slug after slug screaming up at the men ambushed along the edge of the bluffs

An Action Novelet

SHOWDOWN RIDES THE RIVER

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

They called Clint Gregg "just a kid" but he turned out a plumb salty hombre when Monte Slankard's crooked crew tried to copper his lumber deal with the Bonanza Mine!

CHAPTER I

Tumbleweed Breed

IT WAS Clint Gregg's last night as a printer on the *Riverfork Prospector* and probably that was why old Pop Dorrigan laid it into the kid so hard. Resentment had been festering in Pop's heart during the weeks he had watched Gregg's increasing restlessness and tonight was his last chance to get it off his chest. If he had used a whiplash, his words could not have cut Gregg any deeper.

"You're just a drifter, kid. You'll never amount to a hoot in Hades. I'm danged if I know why I let Molly talk me into letting you plant your picket pin in Riverfork. Your tumbleweed breed never stays put."

Gregg felt sickish-like inside. He kept his head buried in the innards of the rickety old printing press, making a big

fuss of locking the forms on the flat bed. In reality he was avoiding the scorn he knew he would see in Molly Dorrigan's eyes, over by the typecases where she was setting up a display ad.

Six months ago Clint Gregg had ridden into town with assets confined to his bedroll and saddle and a leggy roan named Skeeter. Free as a sneeze, he called himself. But he had credentials to prove he was a journeyman printer and old Pop Dorrigan, who had kept the *Prospector* going on a shoestring for twenty-odd years, had been glad enough to hire him.

Gregg was lean and easy-going and twenty-two, and he had a kid's ambition to be his own boss. Yet he knew Pop Dorrigan and Molly believed he was a quitter, a rover, when he had announced that he was leaving Riverfork as soon as this week's edition was off the press.

The strained silence was broken by the clatter of a sounder in the adjoining room where Pop Dorrigan had his Overland Telegraph office, but the old man was too wrapped up in his stormy emotions to pay it any notice.

"That's our call, Pop!" Molly Dorrigan said in a tight voice. "Go see what it is."

Fuming like a hogtied steer, the oldster stamped into the telegraph room and shut the door with a vehement slam. Gregg made an elaborate business of throwing the gearshift lever which connected the old press to the waterwheel shaft which provided the *Prospector* with a primitive but dependable source of power.

The machinery ground into motion. Rollers fed ink to type faces and paper feeders plucked mechanically at the pile of newsprint. Then the waterwheel shaft grated to an abrupt stop.

"Everything goes wrong at once," muttered Clint Gregg with a groan, shoving the gear lever into neutral. "The waterwheel's jammed on a snag. You ought to get Pop to build a screen above the millrace, to stop all the junk that drifts down the creek."

GREGG got a pair of hip boots out of the corner and started pulling them on. He found himself grateful for the excuse to get out of the office, away from Molly's accusing eyes.

He stole a look at the girl, aware of the pang which always gripped him when he studied her young, willowy beauty. Her grimy printer's apron could not conceal the supple grace of her figure, nor did the green eyeshade detract from the tawny sheen of her hair. Molly was twenty, but she looked seventeen.

"I know what you're thinking, Molly," Clint Gregg said huskily. "That I'm a quitter and a saddle bum. But you know I want a paper of my own. I'd never get anywhere in Riverfork, drawing your Dad's wages. You can see that, can't you, Molly?"

Molly turned from the font cabinet, the mist in her eyes belying her little smile.

"Sure. Sure, I understand, Clint. Only Dad had set his heart on you taking over the paper some day. Don't mind him."

Gregg lighted a lantern and took an ax from its wall bracket. He walked out the back door overlooking the Rio Tonto and went around the side of the *Prospector* building to the water wheel.

He was standing hip-deep in the millrace, chopping at the snag which had fouled the waterwheel when he happened to spot the man drifting down the Rio Tonto on a raft.

The night was black as the inside of a chimney but the slim sickle of a young moon put a sparkling pattern on the river. Gregg noticed the silhouetted figure when it slid momentarily in view across the moonglade, and realized the man was laboring to pole his raft inshore after missing the ford upstream.

Gregg leaned on his ax to watch. The raftsman was obviously in trouble. As near as Gregg could make out in the gloom, he was trying to edge his raft out of the pull of the Tonto and make a landing on the sandbar which the tailrace had thrust out into the river.

It was not unusual for prospectors up in the Copperlode mining country to ride the Tonto as a short-cut out of the hills. But if the current swept a raft over the Riverfork ford, there wouldn't be another chance to land in the next fifty miles. Sheer granite cliffs lined the river to its junction with the Gila.

"That feller could use some help," Gregg decided, tossing his ax on the bank and picking up the lantern. "I reckon this job can wait a few minutes."

As he waded down the tailrace Gregg could hear the riverman's pole sloshing desperately against the draw of the current, although both raft and rider were invisible at this distance.

"Keep polin', amigo!" Gregg shouted, waving his lantern. "I'll wade out and

lend you a hand."

A guttural oath was Gregg's answer. Then a six-gun spat flame from the blackness and a bullet snuffed out Gregg's lantern in a shower of flying glass.

"Hey! What's the—" A second bullet ricocheted off the water alongside the kid's boots and whined off into space.

Gregg stooped until the water poured over his boot tops, to keep from exposing himself against the lighted windows of the printshop. Whoever the proddy stranger was, he didn't want help to come any closer.

A heavy splash sounded. Next came the churning sound of a man plunging through armpit-deep water toward the Tonto bank. A moment later the invisible gunman splashed into the shallows and scrambled up the mudbank off to Gregg's right. The printer had a fleeting glimpse of a figure in a sombrero running at a crouch past the lights of a saloon up the street. Then he was gone.

"Clint—Clint!" came Molly Dorrigan's voice from the back door of the *Prospector* shack. "What's all that shooting?"

Gregg hid the bullet-smashed lantern in the weeds as he waded out of the tailrace. There was no use scaring Molly.

"Probably some cowpoke working on a likker jag," he said. "Dang it, Molly, I dropped my lantern in the crick."

The girl laughed with relief as Gregg climbed the steps.

"I'm all unstrung," she confessed sheepishly. "I thought those shots were right out back."

The door of the telegraph room burst open and Pop Dorrigan emerged, his grizzled features flushed with excitement.

"All blazes broke loose up in the Copperlodes tonight, Clint!" the old man yelled. "Somebody dynamited Gipp Morgan's railway trestle up the river and wrecked a train load of lumber Morgan aimed to build his new camp with this winter."

THEN Gregg's heart raced as a newspaperman's will at the scent of a big story. But this news meant far more than a headline for tomorrow's *Prospector*. This might be the spark that would explode the bloodiest feud in the history of Arizona Territory. Trouble had been brewing up in the Copperlodes ever since the powerful Arizona & Eastern combine had started crowding out the smaller syndicates like Gipp Morgan's Bonanza outfit.

"Gipp was ridin' the caboose at the time of the blast," Dorrigan read excitedly from the notes he had copied off the Overland wire. "The hoghead and fireman were scalded to death when the locomotive dived in the river, but the fireman talked before he cashed in his chips. He told Morgan the man who touched off the dynamite made his getaway on a raft down the Rio Tonto."

Clint Gregg remembered his bullet-wrecked lantern lying in the weeds back of the printshop and he didn't need a diagram to tie up what had just happened with the news that had ridden the wires of the Overland Telegraph just now.

In all probability the Arizona & Eastern syndicate had hired somebody to wreck Morgan's lumber train. Somebody right here in Riverfork, most likely, for the raft rider had been willing to kill a man to keep his identity secret.

"Gipp Morgan told the operator at Summit that Arizona and Eastern was back of this outrage," Dorrigan went on. "Without that lumber, Morgan can't build bunkhouses to shelter his men after the snow flies. He stands to see every man on his payroll desert the Bonanza in favor of A and E's camp over on Sunblaze Gulch."

Gregg pursed his lips thoughtfully.

The kid voiced a judgment more mature than his years would indicate.

"Of course the *Prospector* can't lay itself open to a libel suit by accusing a rival syndicate of planting that dynamite, just on Morgan's say-so."

Although Riverfork was too far downriver to call itself a mining camp, copies of the *Prospector* were read avidly by the miners throughout the Copperlode country. A generation ago Riverfork had been a trading post. But the town had mushroomed when sodbusters started filing homesteads on the lush expanse of Superstition Valley, and their patronage had given the *Prospector* a new lease on life.

"Molly, you start tearin' down the front page," Dorrigan gave brisk orders. "Clint, I'll give you the lowdown and you can start settin' type. We'll be the first sheet in the Territory to carry this story."

Dorrigan cleared a space on his littered editorial desk and scribbled out a lead for Gregg to set up in type, relating the hill-country outrage which would probably ruin Gipp Morgan's Bonanza and which had cost two lives in the bargain.

The office hummed with activity, each of the three carrying out their respective

jobs to rush the story into print.

Clint Gregg, his deft fingers flicking type from the font compartments, kept pace with the old man's pencil, alert to do some editorial revision if Dorrigan's story verged on the libelous.

Paragraph two contained information which caused the kid printer to stop work for a re-reading:

> Bonanza is faced with a total shutdown of mining activity until spring because the wreck has deprived the syndicate of shoring timbers. As Morgan's only railroad engine is damaged beyond repair, his only chance would be to build a new trestle and haul the cars to Stope Gulch by means of horse or mule power. Before this could be done winter snows will have blocked the passes.
>
> This means that Bonanza can write off as dead loss some fifty thousand board feet of lumber, most of it undamaged but sure to be ruined by a winter in the open weather.

A strange, dreamy look drew Gregg's eyes out of focus. He laid down his composing stick and walked over to the front window, peering thoughtfully at the lighted windows of the frame shacks which lined the main street.

Every stick of lumber in Riverfork had been hauled across the desert by mule wagon. A boom town needed lumber to expand. Perhaps—perhaps Bonanza's misfortune would prove to be Riverfork's good fortune.

And somewhere along the trend of thought that had taken root in Clint Gregg's mind was the feeling that his own destiny might be tied up in what was now only a half-formed plan.

"Clint!" Dorrigan's harsh voice cut into his thoughts. "Quit dilly-dallyin' and throw that type together. We're late already."

CHAPTER II

A Boom Town Needs Lumber

GREGG'S lips bore a peculiar half smile as he turned to watch Dorrigan and his daughter lug the front page chase over to a stone topped composing table.

"Pop." Gregg tried to keep his voice from faltering. "You and Molly will have to put the paper to bed. I've thought of something and I got to work fast before somebody else gets the same idea."

Gregg was moving in the vague fashion of a sleepwalker, his mind on other things as he clapped on his shapeless gray Stetson and stalked out into the night. He heard Dorrigan's sharp voice as he closed the door:

"What did I tell you, Molly? A no-good drifter. Skippin' from pillar to post like a gadfly. Makin' us go to press a day late—"

Lamplight glowed in the front window of the frame shack where the Superstition Valley Farmers' Association had their office. Brad Laydon, the president and treasurer of the combine, opened the door in response to Gregg's knock.

"Howdy, son," greeted Laydon cordially. "If you're scouting for news, I'm afraid the association can't help you this week."

Gregg's face was flushed as he drew up the chair Laydon offered him alongside the old man's desk.

"Mr. Laydon, your Farmers' Association aims to build a grain warehouse here in town, don't it?"

Laydon's eyes narrowed quizzically.

"Ye-es. The spur railroad from Tucson will be built through the valley by spring. Our homesteaders need a central warehouse at the railhead."

Gregg's eyes shone with boyish eagerness.

"Lumber's been holding you back—is that right?"

"Right." Laydon's fingers drummed the desk top. "But we can't afford to pay the rates it would take to freight lumber all the way from Phoenix on Jim Trent's wagons, and that's the only available means of transport."

"How much," Gregg asked, "would the Association be willing to pay for enough lumber, laid down in Riverfork, to build the size warehouse you need?"

Laydon fished through his desk pigeonholes and drew out a builder's estimate.

"We-ell, son it'll take thirty thousand feet of dimension lumber and shiplap to do the job. I can't quote exact figures, but the Farmers' Association would be willing to tack twenty percent haulage charges onto the prevailing retail prices at the yard in Phoenix."

Gregg stood up, sweat beads glinting on his forehead in the glare of Laydon's ceiling lamp.

"Would you put that offer in writing, on

your association letterhead?" asked the kid. "I figger I can deliver enough lumber to fix it so the association won't have to wait until spring to let the Tucson railroad haul that lumber. Just think what a jump that would give your homesteaders gettin' their fall wheat to market."

Laydon hesitated, then wheeled around in his swivel chair and pulled open a drawer full of stationery.

"You're talkin' in riddles, Clint," the association boss said with a laugh, "but if you can bring a miracle like that to pass this winter I don't reckon I'll ask questions."

Armed with his precious paper, Clint Gregg left the association office five minutes later and cut diagonally across the street toward the livery stable where Jim Trent, the freighter, kept his stock.

As Gregg was in the act of knocking at Trent's door, it opened in his face and forced the kid printer to step back into shadow. Framed on the threshold was the frock-coated figure of Monte Slankard, owner of the town's biggest saloon and gambling hall.

Pausing with one foot on the doorstep, the beefy gambler took a cheroot from his checkered vest, lighted it, and exhaled a plume of smoke.

"We'll iron out the details later in the week, Trent. I'll check with you later."

Slankard turned on his heel and strode off into the night without noticing Gregg's presence on the boardwalk. Before Jim Trent could shut the door, Gregg stepped into the lamplight. The wizened old wagoner recognized Gregg and grinned.

"Howdy, Clint. How's the newspaper business?"

GREGG stepped inside and waited till the freight line boss closed the door before he spoke.

"Mr. Trent, you're the only man in the county who can help me out. I want to rent ten-twelve of your heaviest wagons for a little job of hauling I got in mind. I'll need 'em right away."

Jim Trent, his gaunt face burned saddle color by thirty years of mule skinning across the Arizona deserts, aimed a gout of tobacco juice at the spittoon across the room.

"Son, I'd shore like to oblige yuh," the freighter answered, pointing to a sheaf of greenbacks spread out on his desk. "But Slankard just got through leasin' every wagon I can spare for the next three weeks."

Disappointment put a choking sensation in Gregg's throat. Three weeks would be too late to haul Gipp Morgan's lumber down out of the Copperlodes. Winter had already come to the divide and snowdrifts would soon block the only wagon road that led from Riverfork back into the mining country.

"Maybe I can persuade Slankard to let his job wait," Gregg suggested. "I've got to have my wagons this week or not at all."

Trent started gathering up the currency.

"No dice, Clint. I've already closed the deal with Slankard. Seems Monte aims to haul a batch of lumber down from Rattlesnake Canyon. Bonanza lost a train load of lumber this afternoon when the Rio Tonto trestle give way and Slankard figures he can salvage what ain't smashed up, if he works fast."

Gregg's mouth compressed into a thin hard line.

"Where did Monte Slankard hear about that train wreck so soon?" he blurted before he knew what he was saying. "It only happened this evenin'. Pop got word of it on the Overland Telegraph not a half hour ago."

The old freighter shrugged.

"Slankard didn't say, Clint. But that's how she stacks up. The only wagons this side of Phoenix are tied up. Yore job will have to wait, I reckon."

Gregg left Trent's freight office, numb with surprise. There was only one possible explanation of how Monte Slankard could have learned this soon about the wreck of the Bonanza Syndicate's train.

"Monte Slankard was the gent I spooked ridin' that raft tonight. He dynamited that trestle so's he could bid in Morgan's lumber and sell it at a fancy price here in town."

As things stood, Slankard held all the aces. And Gregg was under no illusions about the kind of game Slankard would play if anyone tried to deal themselves in on Morgan's lumber.

Rumor in the Territory had it that Monte Slankard had come from Texas with a bounty on his topknot. The gambler had built the Buckhorn Saloon and gambling den ten years ago, paying with gold the exorbitant cost of hauling lumber across the desert by mule team.

Gregg had been in town long enough to know that Slankard had waxed affluent on the profits of his bar and gaming tables. The more solid citizens of the community

had long since recognized the Buckhorn for what it was—a sinkhole of outlawry, blighting an otherwise law-abiding settlement.

Slankard was among the few men in Riverfork who habitually packed Colt .45s in thonged-down holsters under his Prince Albert coat. Men had died under those flaming sixes on occasion, but Slankard had never been molested by the law. His killings were always justified by witnesses who would not have dared testify otherwise.

Gregg sauntered into the Apache Cafe and ordered supper, hoping food would ease the ache that despair had planted in his heart over in Trent's office.

The way things stood, he was licked before he started. Monte Slankard had sewed up the only wagons Gregg could lay his hands on. Without wagons, it would be impossible to get Morgan's lumber out of the Copperlodes before snow closed the hills for the winter.

As it was, he was facing the most dangerous man in Superstition Valley with little more than his bare fists and an ambitious idea.

BUT ambition dies hard with youth. Fortified by the ham and eggs and fried spuds which the Chinese waiter brought him, Gregg's outlook began to perk up.

"There's more'n one way to skin a cat," he told his reflection in the blistered mirror across the restaurant counter. "Slankard's got the jump on me, but I doubt if he's made any kind of deal with Gipp Morgan yet. All I got to do is lay the cards in front of Morgan and see if they won't rake in the pot."

Gregg flipped a four-bit piece on the counter and left the Apache Cafe with almost a swagger in his gait. His eyes held an optimistic glint when he returned to the *Prospector* office to find Molly pulling a proof of the train wreck story.

"Pop's out hacking at that snag under the waterwheel," the girl said, meeting his eyes with a cold stare. "I think you'd better go roll your blankets and pull out before he comes back, Clint. Pop's kind of brokenhearted about you."

The kid printer put his hands on Molly's shoulders and pushed her into Pop's swivel chair.

"And I'd be kind of brokenhearted if Pop's daughter thought I was leaving town without tellin' her I loved her," he said boldly. "Listen, Molly girl. I'm ridin' up to Stope Gulch to see Gipp Morgan tonight. I want to tell you why."

The anger died in Molly Dorrigan's eyes as Gregg outlined his narrative of the evening's event in terse, clipped sentences. When he had finished, the girl's eyes mirrored a strange new fear.

"Your scheme would work—it's got to work!" she whispered. "But Clint—I can't let you buck Slankard's dirty game. You—you don't know that man. He—he tried to make love to me once. He's like a timber wolf, Clint—cunning and treacherous and deadly."

Gregg rose from where he had been kneeling by Molly's chair and flexed the ropey muscles in his long arms.

"I've *got* to go through with it, Molly—for us. If it worked out, think what that dinero would mean. Pop would sell us the *Prospector* and retire. And you'd see your tumbleweed take root, Molly. We'd grow along with Riverfork, you and me. There's a big future in this town."

Pop Dorrigan's muffled yell reached their ears from outside, telling Molly to throw the gears into mesh with the waterwheel axle.

Gregg took advantage of the diversion to slip out the door, nor did he slacken his swift stride when he heard Molly's imploring voice calling him through the night.

He kept his Skeeter pony stabled at the Cloverleaf Livery Barn next to Slankard's Buckhorn saloon. Gregg ducked through a side door, picked his saddle from the row hanging behind the stalls, and cinched the kak snug on the roan's barrel.

There was a rusty old Colt .44 in one of his saddlebags and as an afterthought Gregg buckled the gun harness around his lean middle. He was leading the gelding toward the street entrance of the stable when he found the way blocked by the towering form of Monte Slankard.

Light from the barroom next door etched the gambler's jutting cheekbones in harsh relief, picked blue highlights on the long black hair which told of a strain of Injun blood somewhere in Slankard's background.

"Ridin' somewhere this time of night, kid?"

Gregg's necknape prickled at the veiled menace in Slankard's voice. He saw the gambler's eyes shift to the yellowed bone stock of his six-gun and he cursed the

impulse that had caused him to sling the holster so far frontward.

"No law against hossback ridin', is there?" Gregg countered, his right hand making a fist on Skeeter's bitt ring.

"That depends." Slankard flicked ash from a half-smoked cheroot. "Jim Trent was in the barroom just now. Tells me you propositioned him for a few wagons tonight."

Gregg made no reply.

"Yuh're saddled up," Slankard went on after a pause. "See that yuh keep pushin' miles between you and Riverfork, Gregg. Yore eyesight was a little too good down on the river tonight. Riverfork ain't big enough to hold the two of us after that."

Clint Gregg knew Slankard was baiting him into a gun draw. The gambler had as good as confessed that it was he who had shot the lantern in Gregg's hand tonight. And Gregg knew Slankard could draw and empty his gun before Gregg could let go of the bridle and lay a hand on his own .44.

That was Slankard's plan. Gregg knew too much to be allowed merely to ride out of town on threat of death if he showed his face in Riverfork again.

Because Slankard's eyes were watching the gun-hand which held Skeeter's bridle, the gambler didn't see the left uppercut which the kid launched from his bootstraps.

Every ounce of the kid's wiry strength was behind the punch. The blow caught Slankard on the point of the jaw and staggered him. Slankard's spurs hooked on the boardwalk and sent him sprawling on his back.

Shaking his head like a dazed pugilist, Monte Slankard saw the kid printer vault into stirrups and spur past him.

Propping himself on an elbow, Slankard pawed a gun from leather and sent a fast shot at the rider crouched low over the pommels. He cursed as the rapid beat of hoofs echoed back from the direction of the Tonto ford. The slug had missed and Clint Gregg was out of range by now.

Slankard climbed to his feet, rubbing his jaw, where the kid's fist had struck. What a fool Slankard had been not to suspect that his spunky foe would try to trick him! Now what would happen? It was dollars to doughnuts that Gregg would not give up his wild plans. Too bad the bullet had not hit him. Now the cat was out of the bag, and there was no telling what would happen.

CHAPTER III

Boss of the Bonanza

THERE was a feel of approaching winter in the keen mountain air when dawn reddened the Copperlode peaks ahead of Clint Gregg. Behind him lay thirty miles of twisting Indian trail. Thirty more stretched between him and the Bonanza Mining Syndicate's camp on the headwaters of the Tonto.

An icy wind whipped at the printer's face, penetrating the fleece-lined mackinaw which he had donned from the roll on his cantle. The glint of new snow on the divide to northward served as a constant reminder to Gregg that time was running short if he were to get Gipp Morgan's salvage lumber to Riverfork before blizzards made the high country inaccessible. And a winter's weathering would twist lumber into junk fit only for stovewood.

The kid kept a stirrup eye on his back trail all morning. He had drawn cards in Slankard's game and he knew the Riverfork gambler must have dispatched a drygulch crew on his trail within minutes after he forded the Tonto.

The sun had started to wester by the time Gregg's pony topped the ridge overlooking Stope Gulch. A cluster of dirty tents and heaps of new mine tailings revealed the site of Bonanza's diggings, a camp doomed to inactivity over the winter now that it had been cut off from its only source of building materials.

Gregg found Gipp Morgan at a tarpaper shack near the mine shafthouse which served him as the syndicate office. Morgan was a big, bluff man in his middle fifties, square of jaw and with a lethal glint in his eyes to match the guns buckled on the outside of his jumper.

"If Arizona and Eastern sent you over here, yuh know the trail out!" snapped the Bonanza boss, before Gregg could dismount. "I been expecting them to send some feller with an offer to buy me out."

It was obvious from Morgan's red-shot eyes and unshaven jaw that the mine boss had spent a sleepless night. The loss of his lumber train and, still worse, the loco-

motive the syndicate had shipped out West to haul ore to the stampmills, had faced Gipp Morgan with a crisis that might drag Bonanza down to ruin, if his men quit to hire out to a rival combine.

Gregg read the look of a man who wasn't licked until the last card was down, and decided to play his own ace.

"I'm Clint Gregg, of the *Riverfork Prospector,*" he said. "I've come with a business proposition, yes. But I can also tell you the name of the man who dynamited your trestle last night. He didn't have anything to do with the Arizona and Eastern, so far as I know."

The color drained from Morgan's windbitten face. Slowly the hostility faded from his gaze and he jerked his head toward the tarpaper shack.

"Light and cool yore saddle, Gregg. We can talk inside."

Over a cup of revitalizing black coffee from a pot on Morgan's barrel stove, the printer from Riverfork told what he'd learned.

"Monte Slankard!" whispered the syndicate boss, when Gregg had finished. "I've had many a drink in that tinhorn's place. I tried to sell him a block of Bonanza stock, a few months back."

Morgan unholstered his guns and jacked the cylinders open in turn, checking the loads. Gregg, reading the man's intentions, shook his head soberly.

"You can't ride down to Riverfork and force a showdown just on my say-so, Morgan. I'm just a slick-ear kid and Slankard's a power in the town. Besides which, a man in your position can't take the law in his own hands."

Morgan paced the floor like a caged animal.

"But blast it—Bonanza will be set back six months developing this new shaft, on account of Slankard. You expect me to take that kind of deal layin' down?"

"No." The kid kept his voice modulated, tempering the older man's excitement. "But you can wait for Slankard to tip his hand. Sooner or later Slankard will show up, make a bid for that lumber. Then you can ask him how he got the news about the wreck. He can't answer that one without trapping himself."

Morgan refused to be placated.

"He can let a day or so lapse, and then tell me he got the news from some saddle bum driftin' through his saloon." Morgan paused. "Yuh said yuh had a proposition to make me, Gregg. What's the deal?"

QUICKLY Gregg reached in his pants pocket and drew forth the typed statement which Brad Haydon of the Farmer's Association had given him the night before.

"I want to buy that lumber for what it's worth to you, Mr. Morgan," the kid said bluntly. "This paper is Haydon's guarantee to buy the lumber at Phoenix prices, on delivery. That way, you can make up some of your loss to the syndicate, and I—well, I got a chance to buy out Pop Dorrigan's newspaper."

Something in Clint Gregg's forthrightness appealed to the bluff old miner, who remembered back to when he had been Gregg's age, meeting the world with his own brain and sinew.

"You could salvage the bulk of that lumber," Morgan commented musingly. "And I could sell it to yuh at what it cost me and still allow yuh a good margin of profit. I bought it wholesale at a mill. Haydon agrees to pay you retail prices for enough material to put up his warehouse."

Gregg jumped to his feet and grabbed the mine boss's hand.

"I'll ride down to the Tonto and look over the wreckage this afternoon!" he exclaimed. "I'm in your debt, Mr. Morgan."

Morgan grinned crookedly.

"Hold yore hosses, son. You're overlookin' one thing. You say Trent's freight wagons are leased to Monte Slankard until after snow flies. You can't get wagons anywhere else. How do yuh aim to get that lumber delivered to Riverfork? Pack it on yore back?"

Gregg smiled enigmatically.

"I've figured that out, Mr. Morgan. What's to prevent me, now that I've got your release on the lumber as it stands from—"

The shack door opened and one of Morgan's foremen poked his head inside.

"A rider just got in from Riverfork, boss," said the miner. "Says he's got enough dinero in his saddlebags to take that wrecked lumber off yore hands. Feller name of Slankard."

Morgan stiffened, dropping a hand to gun-butt. From the corner of his mouth Gregg drawled a warning:

"Take it easy. You only got my word that Slankard shoveled all this bad luck your way."

Morgan nodded without looking around.

"Send Slankard in, Jackson," he or-

dered the miner.

Saddle leather creaked outside and then Monte Slankard was ducking his head under the door, tugging off the pair of beaded buckskin gauntlets he wore to protect his sensitive fingers.

"Howdy, Morgan. I—" Slankard broke off as his snake-bright eyes spotted Clint Gregg. "Well. You work fast for a kid, Gregg. That must have been yore bronc I saw outside."

Gregg shrugged and came straight to the point.

"If you've ridden over here to buy up Morgan's lumber, you've drawed to a blank, Slankard. I've already closed the deal with Morgan."

Slankard's nostrils twitched but he gave no other outward sign of the swift anger that seized him. He turned to Gipp Morgan.

"Business is business, Morgan. I'll double whatever price the kid offered you, cash on the barrel head."

Morgan controlled himself with a visible effort.

"How did you know about that wreck?" he demanded.

Slankard's bloodshot eyes met Morgan's without flinching.

"A prospector was talkin' in my saloon around midnight. Said he saw yore train piled up in the riverbed at Rattlesnake Canyon. I figured yuh wouldn't want to take a dead loss on that lumber, so here I am."

Morgan's face turned the color of spoiled beef.

"Gregg's got proof it was *you* who blew up my trestle last night!" challenged the mine boss recklessly. "I'm givin' yuh a fair chance to fill yore hand, Monte Slankard!"

You cussed fool, Clint Gregg thought. Slankard could smoke both of us down before we could draw!

But the gambler chose to let the showdown pass.

"Don't talk foolish, Morgan," Slankard said softly. "It's my word against this kid's. Gregg packs a grudge against me because I put him on my Injun list at the Buckhorn bar."

Morgan had muffed his chance to force Slankard's hand and his failure galled him. But the raw edge was still on his voice as he jerked his thumb toward the door and gave his ultimatum:

"Get out, Slankard. Yuh're wastin' yore time here."

SLANKARD tugged on his gauntlets, his hooded eyes bright with hate as he turned to Clint Gregg.

"*'Sta bueno.* Yuh've called the play, Gregg. I think yuh're bluffin', because you ain't got the wagons to move that lumber to Riverfork. But I aim to call yore bluff."

Gregg knew he had heard his own death sentence. Any man with savvy enough to figure up the odds would back down while his skin was in one piece. But Pop Dorrigan had accused him of wearing a quitter's brand, and in his heart Clint Gregg knew he would play out the hand the way it had been dealt.

Chin sunk on his chest, big Gipp Morgan watched through the shack window until Monte Slankard had disappeared over the south ridge, following the Injun trail toward Superstition Valley.

"I reckon the next move is yores, kid," he said heavily.

Gregg set aside his coffee cup and pulled on his mackinaw.

"Mr. Morgan, I've got one more favor to ask of you—one I'll pay you for. You've got forty, fifty men idle here at Stope Gulch. I'd like to hire 'em to unload those lumber cars."

"I can send a crew down to the Tonto any time yuh want 'em," Morgan promised. "It's down-grade all the way to the trestle and they can ride gravity on one of my ore gondolas. And I'll loan yuh a donkey-engine to boot."

Gregg reached the dynamite-blasted trestle on the Rio Tonto shortly before sundown. Morgan's crew of miners would follow in the morning, giving the kid printer a chance to look over the ground and lay his plans for "skinning the cat," as he phrased it.

The set-up was more favorable than Gregg had dared hope. Rattlesnake Canyon was only twenty feet deep where the trestle had spanned the gap. Morgan's locomotive, its boiler crumpled and ruptured like a tin can under a bootheel, lay half submerged in the muddy waters of the Tonto.

Four flatcars which had been stacked high with shoring timbers had plunged into the shallow canyon, sprawled amid the matchwood debris of the ruined trestle. The rest of the train, consisting of fourteen short-coupled ore cars, had been derailed or capsized along the right-of-way. But, upon inspection, Gregg calculated that ninety per cent of the ship-

lap and dimension stuff was undamaged.

All in all, here was more than enough lumber to enable the Farmer's Association down in Riverfork to build their warehouse.

CHAPTER IV

Down the River

WHEN gathering darkness made it impossible to continue appraising the situation, Gregg mounted his roan gelding and followed the mining railroad three miles to the trading post at Summit. He bedded down Skeeter in the trader's barn and walked over to the Overland Telegraph station.

"Been expecting yuh, Gregg," greeted Spud Campbell, the young operator who had supplied the *Prospector* with news items for several years back. "Pop Dorrigan sent yuh a message."

Gregg felt a surge of relief as he read Pop's telegram:

LOOKS LIKE I FIGURED YOU WRONG WHEN I CALLED YOU A QUITTER, SON. MOLLY GAVE ME THE LOWDOWN. S. HASN'T BEEN IN TOWN ALL DAY. WATCH OUT FOR HIM. HE AIN'T OUT JOY RIDING.

"Thanks," Gregg said. "How about sending Pop an answer? Tell him I closed the deal with Morgan and to tell the Farmer's Association I aim to have the lumber laid down in Riverfork by next Friday at the outside. He'll savvy what I mean."

Gregg spent the night on one of Campbell's spare bunks and breakfasted before daylight.

When he got back to the scene of the train wreck, it was to witness the arrival of an ore gondola loaded with twenty of Morgan's Bonanza miners. Coupled ahead of the gondola was a flatcar carrying a donkey engine and a windlass equipped with steel cable.

Gathering the miners about him, Clint Gregg decided to put his cards on the table and trust to their loyalty to see the job through.

"Men, here's the set-up. I've bought this here lumber of Morgan's and I've got a buyer for it down in Riverfork. My job is to deliver it."

A snicker ran through the crowd of mine workers.

"Riverfork is fifty-sixty miles from here," commented one bearded individual derisively. "Morgan says you ain't got wagons. There ain't no railroad runnin' to Riverfork. Yuh hired us to lug this timber on our backs, mebbe?"

Gregg took the jibe good-naturedly.

"The hombre who blew up this trestle made his getaway on a raft," the kid printer said, pointing to the curving expanse of river which snaked off into the hills downstream. "I aim to copy his idea. We'll build rafts out of those twelve-by-twelve shoring timbers. Then we'll transfer the shiplap and shingles and studding onto those rafts. I'll float 'em down to Riverfork. All we got to worry about is a blizzard catching us before the job's done."

It took three days of dawn-to-dark labor to accomplish.

Promising Morgan's men a generous bonus out of the profits he stood to collect from the Farmer's Association, Gregg drove himself and the crew relentlessly.

First, heavy dimension lumber was snaked down the sloping bank below the wrecked trestle, using the donkey engine and its windlass. Four rafts, their length carefully calculated to avoid the risk of jamming at narrow points on the river downstream, were spiked and chained together and set afloat alongside the east bank, moored securely with cables lopped over riverbank boulders.

This job completed, the transferring of the milled lumber was relatively simple. Each stack of siding was pyramided on the rafts to prevent the cargo shifting if the rafts were buffeted against the cliffs lining the river. Each raft was coupled to the one in front of it with log chains loaned by Gipp Morgan for the purpose.

Gregg had a prior knowledge of the river between Rattlesnake Canyon and the Riverfork ford, gained on a fishing trip the past summer. There were no rapids or impassable obstacles on the fifty-mile stretch of river. He estimated the current at less than five miles an hour at this time of year, a rate of flow not too swift to enable him to maneuver the lead raft successfully.

A light snow was sifting down out of leaden skies when, at sundown on the

third day, Gregg spurred his Skeeter horse out on a platform of planks spiked to the back of the lead raft. He led the roan into a cavernlike opening between two stacks of bundled shingles, to protect his mount in case of a bushwhack attack en route.

Gipp Morgan rode down from Stope Gulch to join his men gathered along the bank when Gregg was ready to shove off. He insisted on making the trip alone, refusing to risk the Bonanza miners' lives in the face of Monte Slankard's implied threat to keep the lumber from ever reaching its destination.

MORGAN thrust a Winchester .30-30 into Gregg's hands just before the miners started loosening the mooring cables.

"A long gun may come in handy in a little while, son," warned the syndicate boss. "There's a half a moon tonight. Keep an eye on every foot of rimrock, son. I'll telegraph Pop Dorrigan to expect yuh in around sun-up tomorrow."

Gregg took the rifle gratefully, levering a shell into the breech and squinting tentatively along the sights.

"Thanks, Morgan," the kid said over a handshake. "If Slankard makes trouble, I'll be ready for it."

A shout went up as Gregg signaled for the cables to be released. The miners along the bank started at the front end of the string of rafts and worked back, so that the tug of the current would not jam the lumber-laden rafts crosswise between the canyon walls.

Moving ponderously, the four rafts drifted out into mid-stream, then surged ahead on the sluggish current. Five minutes later the wreckage of the trestle faded behind a veil of swirling snowflakes, the vanguard of winter to the Copperlodes.

Hemmed in by beetling granite scarps, Gregg hunkered down on the lead raft, a fourteen-foot pole handy to keep the rafts from grinding a corner into the sheer cliffs. The river averaged fifty feet in width, giving ample room on either side.

Fifteen miles down the river the cliffs tapered off and the air cleared of snow. A chill night wind stung Gregg's face, bit deep to the marrow of his bones. He had a few uneasy moments when the rafts grated over a submerged gravel bar at the mouth of a subsidiary creek, but the momentum of the current and the inertia of the load pushed the raft train safely over the obstruction.

Midnight found a quarter moon wheeling above fleecy banks of low-scudding cloud. The stacked lumber was limned in an eerie glow and Gregg crouched in shadow, Morgan's rifle across his knees, his eyes probing each gentle curve of the

"I'm Arrestin' Yuh, Bannock Jake—and If Yore Pals Try to Stop Me, They're Dead Men!"

IT TOOK cold nerve for Bob Pryor to talk that way when he and his pards were vastly outnumbered. On his side—Editor Reynolds, Celestino, Al Sieber, and Lew Mills. On his foreman's side—a score of gunnies who were ready to fight to the death to further their chieftain's evil dream of empire. But—so forceful were the Rio Kid's words, so menacing the muzzle of his gun, backed by the firm purpose in his eyes, that the henchmen of Bannock Jake edged away, cowed and fearful.

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river, every nerve tinglingly alive.

Then flame spat from the low rimrock to westward and a bullet threw splinters against Gregg's cheek as the steel-jacketed slug ripped into the stacked shingles beside him.

Monte Slankard was capping his bet with drygulch lead.

Gregg flattened himself against the scaffolding which braced the load. The night echoed with a drumroll of shots, and bore-flashes winked like red eyes from chaparral hugging the cliffbrink high and on his right.

The sleet of bullets peppered the raft and plucked fountains from the river ahead of the floating mass.

Kneeling on his plank ledge, Gregg triggered his Winchester at a spot where the gun flashes had been grouped closest. Hoarse yells rewarded his return fire.

Then the ambuscade was behind him, the rafts gliding majestically around a long S-bend where the Tonto cut through a hogback.

Hoofbeats thundered in Gregg's ears to the left, warning the kid that he faced a murderous cross-fire when the rafts floated out of shadow a hundred yards ahead. Taking advantage of the lull, Greg slithered along the edge of the raft and ducked into the corridor between the stacked shingles where his saddle horse was hitched.

Dead ahead, a clump of willow brake jutted out into the river, mid-way through the hogback's eroded gorge. Elsewhere down-river, Gregg knew it would be impossible to get ashore.

To remain on the raft meant the risk of being trapped if he should run into a cable stretched across the river. It was not unlikely that Slankard's riders, spying on the activity back at Rattlesnake Canyon, had erected such a barrier.

Gregg led the horse out on the plank platform and swung into stirrups. For the moment he was an easy target, etched in the moonlight.

He waited until the raft was brushing past the overhanging willow foliage. Then he spurred Skeeter overboard.

The horse floundered hock-deep in coffee colored mud, nearly unseating its rider as it recovered and lurched through the brake.

Branches whipped at Gregg's face, tore at the rifle under his elbow as the horse crashed up to solid footing.

FOR a moment he reined the dripping horse there, watching the tail-end of the raft train glide past like a floating boxcar. Then he gigged Skeeter in a zigzag through the chaparral which mottled the upper slope, heading for the talus-littered shoulder at the base of the rimrock.

Bushwhackers were yelling to each other across the river, downstream. Steel-shod hoofs clattered on rock. As he broke into the open, the kid glimpsed a string of riders skylined a hundred yards to the south, crowding the lip of the riverbank where their guns could cover the slow-drifting rafts.

Gregg sent the roan up a crumbling ledge and gained the eroded lava shelf at the crest. With the ambush riders spaced at intervals along a quarter-mile stretch of rimrock, he figured he could gamble on being mistaken for one of them until he got close enough to use the Winchester.

"He's hid somewhere in that lumber—he's got to be!" came the stentorian voice of Monte Slankard, dead ahead. "We got to tally that slick-ear yearlin' inside the next five miles."

Clint Gregg skidded his pony to a halt at the far edge of a juniper motte, knee-reining the roan sidewise as he saw a lone rider bearing down on him.

It was Monte Slankard, returning to a position behind the raft train. Gregg recognized the Riverfork gambler's bannering Prince Albert and the sweep of his flat-crowned beaver Stetson.

Masked by the background of juniper scrub, the kid held his position until Slankard was only twenty feet distant, moonrays glinting off the carbine hugged against his ribs.

"Hoist 'em, Slankard. I got a cold drop on you."

The saloonman stiffened in saddle, twisted his face to stare at the dim rider sitting his horse on the edge of the motte. Moonlight revealed the printer's white face and the .30-30 muzzle steadied across his left arm.

"Gregg! No pulin' younker is going to outfox me. All I got to do is yell for my riders—"

"Yell, why don't you?" answered the kid, earing the Winchester hammer to full cock. "It'll be your last yap this side of the grave."

Slankard tossed his carbine to the ground and raised his arms, hatbrim high.

Then, as Gregg lowered his rifle to spur closer in, the gambler's right hand stabbed under the lapel of his frock coat to whip out the hideaway gun holstered there.

Rifle and derringer blazed in unison, but Slankard's hasty aim sent a slug ripping through the underbrush behind Gregg. The kid's bullet smashed the gambler through the heart, the impact of it piling him out of stirrups.

Slankard's body hit the crumbling rimrock with a sodden thud, toppled over the edge and bounced like something in a gunnysack down the talus-littered slope.

Foam geysered from the rippling surface of the Rio Tonto backwater as the gambler's corpse plummeted into the spreading wake of the raft train.

"Gregg's got Bonanza riders backin' his play, men!" came a frenzied shout from a rider on the far bank, who had witnessed Slankard's finish. "They just downed the boss!"

The kid from Riverfork made no effort to halt Slankard's mustang as the riderless horse galloped off to follow the bushwhackers scattering into the badlands. . . .

Dawn was burning on the eastern horizon when Clint Gregg came in sight of Riverfork, riding the same trail that had brought him to town as a tumbleweed printer six months before.

There was a beehive of activity down where the Rio Tonto sluiced over its ford. Massed side by side in the quiet water on the upstream side of the gravel bar were Gregg's four rafts, being moored by Farmers' Association homesteaders while a cluster of townspeople watched from the higher ground.

It was Molly Dorrigan who first caught sight of the rider approaching the edge of the crowd. Her eyes still held the panic they had known when, forty minutes earlier, Gregg's bullet-riddled raft train had floated around the bend, unattended.

"Pop!" the girl called, breaking out of the crowd. "Clint's here! Clint's back!"

The kid printer swung out of stirrups and pulled Molly Dorrigan into the shelter of his arms. They had things pretty well under control when old Pop panted up, pushing an ink-wet copy of the *Prospector* into Gregg's hand.

"Read my last editorial as owner and publisher, son!" the oldster urged. "I called it 'A Tumbleweed Takes Over.'"

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Peg-leg's empty gun sailed past the man's head

TROUBLE COOKIN' COOKIE

By CLARK GRAY

Peg-leg Gosse plays the role of a greedy land-hog—until a gun in the ribs puts some sense in his head!

AFTER supper, while the helper washed up the pots in the flickering light of a coal-oil lantern, Peg-leg Gosse, cook for Ab Jenks' Kitty Cat Ranch, threw aside his apron and stumped across the grass toward the branding corral.

The reddish glow of sunset reflected dimly from the little group of men and horses clustered against the high boards of the corral. The ground nearby, cut and rutted by boot-heels and the tramping of cattle, made treacherous footing for Peg-leg's wooden leg. But he only swore a little absently, his mind turning over with eager anticipation the things he was going to say to Johnny Crites.

As he came up Ab Jenks was talking. Ab faced the sunset, his smooth-shaven face and silver hair a pale orange in the evening light.

"Take it a little easy tonight, boys," Ab said in his rich voice. "Spend yore month's pay if yuh want to—I don't care—but don't get too loop-legged. Tomorrow we got to finish this brandin'."

Somebody laughed, and the group broke up and began to mount their waiting horses. Peg-leg saw Johnny Crites' huge shoulders

turn away. Johnny's head hung morosely.

"Johnny," Peg-leg said, "will yuh come over to the chuck wagon a minute? Want to palaver."

Anxiously, as he led the way back across the rutted strip of ground, Peg-leg checked off again in his mind the things he was going to say to Johnny. He wanted it to be exactly right—in words, and in the shadings of his voice—so Johnny could understand.

The button who worked as helper was just finishing the last of the pots, wiping them hurriedly so that he, too, could get into town with his month's pay. Peg-leg reached the lantern from its hook on the wagon-hoop and set it on the chuckbox.

He lifted himself up into the bed of the wagon and motioned Johnny to sit beside him.

"Trot along, kid," he said to the helper. "I'll put things away."

The button grinned and disappeared, his slight figure outlined an instant against the fading red in the west. Peg-leg fingered the seven coins in his vest pocket.

"What was it yuh wanted to talk about?" Johnny Crites asked him.

Peg-leg took the coins from his pocket. He held them toward the light in his hand. The yellow glow from the lantern reflected gleaming lemon from the gold of the coins. Peg-leg's hand began to shake, as it always did when he held some of his coins.

"See them, Johnny?" he said. "Seven five-dollar gold pieces. Each one smaller'n a dime, and each one worth five dollars."

"Shore," Johnny said a little gruffly. "I see 'em. What about it?"

PEG-LEG understood Johnny's gruffness. Johnny was thinking that those gold coins would buy milk for Nancy, and eggs, and medicine. That was what Peg-leg wanted him to think.

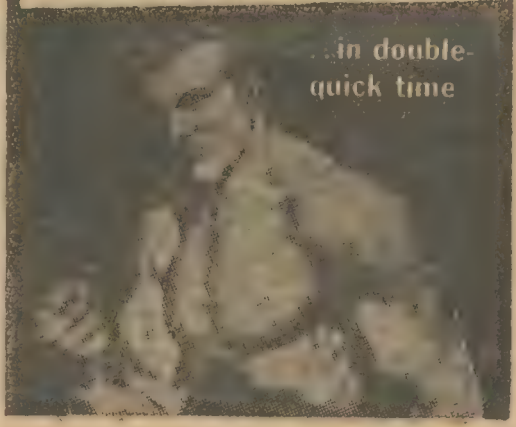
"I been savin' these for years," Peg-leg went on. "Every month I save out enough for tobacco and a shirt or two, and the rest goes into these gold pieces."

"Shucks, I know that," Johnny said, irritated. "Everybody does."

"I want to buy forty acres of yore spread, Johnny." Peg-leg spoke as gently as he could. "I got enough saved up now to live like I want to. I'll buy the forty borderin' on Bird Creek, and I'll pay twenty dollars an acre. Yuh'll have enough to give Nancy the attention she needs."

[*Turn page*]

"Let me show YOU too, HOW TO MAKE YOURSELF COMMANDO-TOUGH



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Johnny turned to face him. The lantern-light reflected deeply the brown softness of his eyes. The patient smile in his big face was tired and pained.

"No," Johnny said. "I have to make a livin' off my land."

"Yuh ain't makin' a livin' off it," Peg-leg said urgently. "Yuh have to hire out to Ab Jenks to get enough to eat. If yuh lose any more calves yuh're done for. Yuh said so yourself yesterday."

"It's the fences," Johnny said, a trace of bitterness in his tone. "Nobody else in Indian Territory fences, but because I bought my section in Jenks' range I got to fence. I'd figgered on my savin's lastin', but not no more. Not after buyin' four miles of barb-wire fence."

"Sell me the forty. That'll help both of us. I'll get the land and Nancy'll get the attention she needs."

Johnny shook his head slowly and got down off the wagon.

"Nope. That forty's all I got on the creek, and I got to have it. I'll ride it out a while longer."

Peg-leg watched the broad back disappearing out of the circle of yellow light.

"Think it over, Johnny," he called.

He waited till he heard the creak of Johnny's saddle, followed by the slow clop of hoofbeats. Then he smiled. Johnny would come around. With a sick wife and a losing business he couldn't afford not to. The forty acres with its rich black loam and abundant supply of cool creek water would be Peg-leg's within a month.

True, it was tough on Johnny. Peg-leg frowned a little. He remembered their wedding—Nancy, her pretty face aglow under the halo of her blond hair, and Johnny towering above her, straight and proud. And Johnny had sunk his last penny into the little spread and the home he had built for her.

Momentarily Peg-leg wondered if Nancy were really seriously sick—so sick she might die for lack of medicine. But resolutely he put the thought out of his mind. That was Johnny's worry now. The way out for the youngster had been made clear with Peg-leg's offer.

He lifted his arm and pulled the draw-string that dropped the canvas fly over the end of the wagon. It fell with a little swish and the lantern twisted gently and sent huge shadows chasing back and forth inside the canvas.

He unclasped the hand that held the gold

and admired the glittering yellow of the coins as they lay in his moist palm. Then, unstrapping his wooden leg where it joined his knee, he worked off the rubber cup at the end. With shortening breath he took out his pocket-knife, opened the corkscrew, and drew out the large cork inserted in a hole in the end of the leg.

His hands trembled now, as they always did. Out of the hollow leg he shook three long, shirt-wrapped bundles. The coins inside gleamed as his shaking fingers unwound the pieces of shirt. The yellow light inside of the wagon seemed to brighten as the three long rows of golden coins came fully into view.

Tonight he refused to let himself admire his savings. His goal was too near won to leave these gleaming coins out of their hiding place a moment longer than necessary. As quickly as his trembling hands permitted, he placed them in the leg, leaned over and got a fresh cork out of the jug of black-strap in the chuckbox, jammed it in with a blow of his fist, and slipped the rubber cup in place.

He dashed his arm across his face to wipe off the nervous sweat, then leaned back, smiling wryly at himself, and relaxed a moment before he lifted the canvas and scrambled out of the chuckwagon. By the time this roundup was over, he was thinking, he would be all set.

OUTSIDE the cool air struck his face pleasantly. He stood for a minute leaning against the wagon to let his eyes get used to the dark. Stars shone brilliantly; the Milky Way flung a broad banner of silver across the sky. He raised the fly and hung the lantern back outside, and went to work putting away the pots and pans.

When everything was in place, he covered a pot of beans with water. Then, remembering that tomorrow was the last day of the roundup and that the boys would expect something special, he set a pan of dried apples to soak. As an afterthought, he threw in a couple of handfuls of raisins.

He extinguished the lantern and sat smoking his pipe and thinking in the starlit darkness. But in a little while, impelled by restlessness and a queer quilty feeling about Johnny Crites, he got to his feet and stumped toward the corral.

Only the two horses that drew the chuckwagon were there now. They whinnied softly

[*Turn page*]

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as he approached. He petted them a little as he always did, then, on sudden impulse, saddled up and rode slowly out toward Bird Creek.

Half-unthinking, he turned toward the ranch of Johnny Crites! At the spot where Johnny's forty bordered on the creek, there was a fifty-foot cliff, except for one less steep pathway down which the cattle went to water.

He passed through the fence and approached the top of the pathway. The swift rushing of water tumbled on his ears. The creek was in flood. Starlight sparkled on the brown turbulent water below, and in the middle of the creek driftwood and treetops twisted and whirled.

Here, on the spot he had picked to pass the rest of his life, his old dreams returned as he smoked. The creek would furnish an inexhaustible supply of water for his chickens, pigs, and a couple of milk cows, with the best garden in the Territory. Ranchers were always hungry for eggs and milk. They wouldn't pay much, but enough for his needs. He could even keep bees for sweetening, and he had heard that pecans grew well here.

He would build a house just large enough for comfort, but small enough so that he could get around easily when old age came. Probably he would get fatter. Visiting cowboys would continue to call him the "Old Goose," but he wouldn't mind then, for he would be living like he wanted to.

He knocked out his pipe, and was just starting to refill it when a vague, distant sound off in the night snapped him suddenly erect. The uneasy bawl of a calf drifted in above the rushing of the river, then the muffled beat of hoofs.

He got to his feet, remembering Johnny Crites' tale of rustlers. He moved to his horse and placed a quiet hand over its muzzle. The horse stood patiently as he stroked it.

The noises increased. Bending down, he saw against the stars the dim silhouette of a half dozen calves, with a single rider drifting behind. Something vaguely familiar about the beardless, erect figure of the rider jogged his memory.

He knew he should slip quickly over to Johnny's shack a half-mile distant. Or he should drag out the six-gun on his hip and drop that rider from his saddle. He did neither. He was not a lawman, he told himself sharply. And the sooner Johnny realized he couldn't hold his herd the sooner the young-

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ster would have to sell the forty.

Nevertheless, some inward prickling of guilt moved him to mount silently and follow in the distance. The unknown rider hazed the calves gently eastward. Peg-leg followed on the rolling prairie, waiting each time the rider showed himself on the skyline until he was in a draw head.

After a couple of miles the slow rolls of the prairie deepened and shortened into blackjack-covered hills. They were getting toward the edge of Ab Jenks' range now, Peg-leg knew.

Inside the black-jacks it was pitch-dark. He had difficulty keeping track of his quarry and was able to follow only by the crackling of the calves in the brush. At last the crackling stopped at a spot he figured must be at the end of Jenk's range. Cautiously he dismounted and stumped forward afoot.

The sudden bawl of a calf, startlingly close, brought him to a halt just in time. Ahead through the budding leaves of black-jack, he glimpsed a small pole corral. Inside milled at least two dozen calves. The unknown rider, a black silhouette against the stars, sat atop the corral rolling a cigarette.

Peg-Leg waited. The rider stuck the cigarette in his mouth and struck a match. By the reflected glow as he cupped the match against his face, Peg-leg saw with jaw-dropping amazement the silver hair and smooth face of ranch owner Ab Jenks.

It was none of his business, he told himself savagely, as he rode back toward the wagon. If Jenks wanted to stoop to calf-stealing from a two-bit rancher like Johnny, that was all right with Peg-leg. But why?

After a while he got the answer. Johnny had bought into Jenks' range. Jenks was playing a crafty game, hiring Johnny by the day and acting friendly, and stealing his calves by night to break the young fellow and force him to sell. An ugly business.

But if Peg-leg kept his mouth shut, Johnny would have to sell, Peg-leg argued to himself, as he turned loose the horse and stumped over to the wagon. And he would get his forty.

He untied the bed-roll and stretched out with a sigh. But sleep, somehow refused to come for a long time. . . .

He wasn't the only one who had slept badly, Peg-leg decided at daylight, when Johnny arrived to gulp down his bacon and

[*Turn page*]

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coffee before the fragrant smoke of the campfire. Johnny's eyes were dark circles in the blue of ascending morning. When the sun broke in a golden glow over the horizon, Peg-leg saw deep furrows in the young rancher's patient face.

Ab Jenks, smooth and friendly as ever, called the riders in his rich, creamy voice to the day's work. The night wrangler built a branding fire before he turned in, and the rest of the crew rode off to complete the last of the roundup.

Peg-leg helped the button clear up the breakfast pots. The kid had been on his first real drunk last night, and his head ached so that he could hardly work. Grinning, Peg-leg told him to sleep it off.

He finished up the work himself, then set the pot of beans on the fire, cooked up a batch of mulligan stew and made a deep apple cobbler from the dried apples and raisins. Shortly before noon the roundup men returned with a herd of bawling cattle. With a great deal of shouting and hoorawing the branding began.

When the sweating cowhands knocked off for noon, Johnny Crites came over after Peg-leg had finished ladling out the chuck. Johnny's patient brown eyes reflected pain as he tilted his Stetson against the sun and squatted down beside the wagon wheel, his plate balanced on his knees.

"Peg-leg," Johnny said, "I lost six more calves last night."

Peg-leg thrust out his wooden leg and sat down with a *thunk*. He didn't look at Johnny.

"Too bad," he answered. "Want to sell that forty now?"

"No." Johnny jabbed at a chunk of meat in the stew. "Yuh couldn't loan me a couple hundred dollars, could yuh?"

The queer guilty feeling seemed to rise in Peg-leg of its own accord. Determinedly he fought against it.

"I'll pay yuh twenty an acre for that forty," he said. "I can't loan yuh any, Johnny."

Johnny sighed. Wordlessly he got to his feet and went over to scrape his untouched plate into the fire. He placed the empty plate in the wreck pan and walked toward the corral, his huge shoulders drooping.

Throughout the afternoon the constant sight of Johnny Crites working in the corral depressed Peg-leg. Johnny's shoulders never lost their droop, nor his patient eyes their look of pain. Peg-leg wondered again if Nancy was sick enough to die.

Fiercely he swore at himself for being a

money-crazy land-hog, but in the next instant he would remember that he had worked and saved ten years for this chance to settle down. And he was not going to be cheated out of it by going soft.

He watched Johnny at supper. The young fellow appeared to be in deep thought about something—he hardly spoke—and Peg-leg began to hope. He was almost sure when Johnny laid aside his plate and approached in the gathering twilight.

"Come over to the house when yuh finish," Johnny said. "We'll talk business."

Peg-leg left the button to clean up. The last red rays of sunlight were disappearing across the empty prairie when he saddled and rode out of the corral. He could feel his heart thumping with anticipation. He had played his hand cleverly, and now he was about to win.

DIM yellow light shone from Johnny's little ranchhouse, with its small collection of outhouses. Peg-leg caught the scent of hogs and realized with a smile that Johnny's ambitions were not far different from his own.

[*Turn page*]

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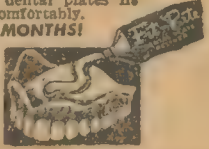

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Johnny's huge dark figure waited for him at the gate.

"Come out to the smoke-house," Johnny said, and something in his voice gritted alarmingly to Peg-leg. "I don't want Nancy to hear us."

Silently Peg-leg stumped along behind. Johnny entered the smoke-house first. A match flickered, then lanternlight flared up, and Peg-leg went in to the sweet, pungent odor of hickory smoke. Two hams and a side of bacon swung from the walls in the flickering light.

Johnny closed the door tightly, then swung around, and for the first time Peg-leg felt misgivings. Johnny's big face was set in stern, unfamiliar lines, and his usually placid brown eyes glittered strangely.

"The doc told me today," Johnny said in a hard, tight voice, "that Nancy's got to have an operation. She's got to go to the Guthrie Hospital, Peg-leg, and I've got to have money to send her. If I don't, she'll die."

Peg-leg leaned back soberly against the wall. His first wild impulse was to offer Johnny all the money he had, to give it with his blessing. But, he reflected, Johnny could get what money he needed by selling the forty. Savagely Peg-leg fought down his sympathy.

Johnny stared at him with those strangely glittering brown eyes.

"Will yuh loan me the money, Peg-leg?"

"I'll buy the forty acres," Peg-leg said.

Something wild flashed across Johnny's face. Abruptly, before Peg-leg had a chance to beat aside his amazement, Johnny drew and rammed his six-gun with painful strength in Peg-leg's middle.

"All right," Johnny gritted, great beads of sweat rolling out his forehead. "I told yuh I wouldn't sell. I'd as soon die an outlaw as give up the only creek land I got. Peg-leg, I'm takin' that money. Hand it over."

Slowly Peg-leg raised his hands. He stood with his back against the smoke-house wall and Johnny's gun in his stomach, and tried to fight off his astonishment and rising anger. Johnny's face was livid as he reached over and took Peg-leg's gun from its holster.

"You go to thunder," Peg-leg said. "I ain't got no money on me, anyhow."

Johnny's lips curled in a twisted grin.

"I know blame well yuh love that gold too much to leave it any place. Take off yore wooden leg."

"What?" Peg-leg said, stricken with sudden agonizing fear.

"Take it off!" Johnny prodded savagely with the sharp muzzle of the gun. "I ain't in no mood for playin'."

Unarmed and helpless, Peg-leg had no choice. He stuck out his leg before him and thumped down on the earthen floor. Slowly he began to unstrap the leg.

"Johnny," he said, "I can't get around without this leg."

Johnny swabbed his face with a huge hand. "I'll bring it back. Meantime yuh stay put here in the smoke-house."

Peg-leg made a final effort as the last strap came loose and he hefted the leg in his hand, feeling the heavy weight of gold drag down the small end.

"Shucks, I left my *dinero* at camp, Johnny. Honest, I ain't got it here."

Johnny didn't say anything. He reached out a shaking hand for the leg. Peg-leg handed it to him by the small end, hoping desperately that Johnny wouldn't notice the extra weight that way. Johnny stuck the leg under his arm and took down the hanging lantern. He went out the door. Peg-leg sat there in the dark and heard the latch snap behind him.

What monkey-wrench of blind Fate, he wondered bitterly, could have been thrown so abruptly into the smooth cogs of his plan? How could he have possibly foreseen that Johnny would turn savage and ugly under pressure? In sweating desperation he sat there with his back against the wall and his flanks on the cool earth, and swore.

He thought about digging his way out. Or burning the smoke-house down. But what good would it do him, without his leg?

When he heard steps outside, he lifted himself by his one foot into a half-crouch, with his back resting against the wall. A crack of light appeared at the door, widened swiftly, and Johnny entered, carrying the lantern and leg in one hand, and his gun in the

[*Turn page*]

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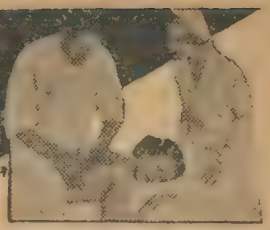

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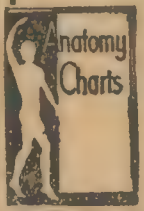

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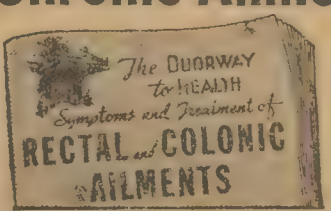

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other, with Peg-leg's gun stuck in his belt. The leather padding of the leg had been tampered with, Peg-leg saw, but the rubber cup looked untouched.

SOME of the passion had left Johnny's face, but his brown eyes still glittered harshly. He held out the leg, strap first.

"I—I can't," he said.

With sudden fury, then, Peg-leg took his chance. He grabbed the leg and swung it. The heavy end tonked against the side of Johnny's head. Johnny's eyelids fluttered, and with a little sigh, he relaxed softly onto the earthern flood.

"Johnny! Johnny!"

Panic-stricken, Peg-leg whirled at the sound of Nancy's voice. It came from the house. But Nancy mustn't find Johnny here. Frantically Peg-leg strapped on his leg, stopping only to pick up his gun. He stumped outside through the darkness of the yard to the front door of the little house. He knocked once and pushed open the door.

Nancy lay back on a couch that had been made into a bed in the drab little living room. A halo of blond hair lay around her head where it rested against the whiteness of the pillow. She smiled at him, a slow, pale smile.

Something inside Peg-leg choked him then, at the wan, pitiful sight of her. Some spring of resistance broke.

"Johnny'll be here in a minute, Nancy," he said.

He shut the door and stumped toward his horse. He had to get away from this place. The turmoil of his feelings shook him like a leaf as he rode out toward the forty acres.

He sat at the head of a cowpath, watching the turbulence of the spring flood fifty feet below flickering and twisting in the starlight. Fiercely he fought to calm himself, but the shock of his fight with Johnny—and the disturbance of having seen Nancy's sick face—left him skittery, scared.

First thing, he had to find out about the gold. Hands shaking, he unstrapped the leg. He hefted the weight of it. It seemed the same, but he had to be sure. He worked at the rubber cup.

A quietly muffled hoofbeat came to him above the noise of rushing water. He turned. Not ten yards away loomed the black silhouette of Ab Jenks, noiselessly drifting four more of Johnny's calves down the trail.

Something had changed in Peg-leg. He didn't hesitate now, for this time his mind was clear. The memory of Nancy raised a

sudden exultation in him, and he drew his gun and aimed.

"Vamoose, Jenks!" he shouted, and pulled the trigger.

The hammer clicked against an empty chamber. Of course, Johnny must have unloaded his gun.

Jenks whirled fiercely to earth then, with an inarticulate cry. Peg-leg saw the blackness of his head move against the stars, heard his savage snarl, and the roar of his .45. Something whined past Peg-leg's ear.

He threw his empty gun. It sailed past Jenks' head as Jenks swooped toward him in a savage lunge along the cliff edge. Jenks fired again. The bullet fanned a wind against Peg-leg's cheek.

He had to throw the leg, then. The heavy weight in the end of it arched through the air, twisting against the Milky Way until it crashed against Ab Jenks' chin.

Jenks' lunge carried him forward even after he closed his eyes and slumped, but the force of the blow twirled him sideward. Before Peg-leg's horrified eyes, Jenks' stepped off the cliff into space, limbs flailing slackly. Behind him, tumbling end over end, sailed the wooden leg. After a minute there came a splash. Then silence.

Johnny Crites appeared then, breathless from running, with a rifle in his hands. Peg-leg turned to regard him from his sitting position on the edge of the Cliff. Now, he thought, he would never know whether the gold was really in the leg or whether Johnny had taken it. Not that it mattered much. If Johnny wanted to lie about it—well, Nancy would be saved anyhow.

"What in thunder's the shootin' about?" Johnny panted.

Peg-leg leaned back on his hands. He didn't say anything. There wasn't anything to say.

"What's goin' on here?" Johnny repeated.

Peg-leg indicated the flooding creek with his thumb.

"Just knocked Ab Jenks into the river. He stole yore calves. I'll show yuh where they are tomorrow."

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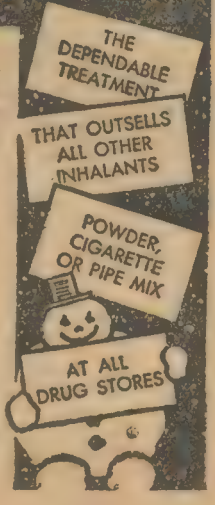

HE LEANED back on his hands and sat there. The long vision of his dreams went glittering before him. Johnny was talking, but Peg-leg didn't listen. Johnny couldn't say anything now that would help.

"Hey!" Johnny shook his shoulder. "Don't yuh hear me? I said I been a cussed fool, and I'm willin' to sell yuh this forty acres now. Yuh can fence me off this strip for the cattle to come through—that's all I need anyhow. I been a fool, Peg-leg, but I learned different when I tried to steal yore *dinero*. Just couldn't do it, somehow. So yuh can buy the forty now."

The bitter irony of it swelled through Peg-leg's veins in a savage surge of agony.

"No," he said. "I can't buy yore forty. I threw the blasted leg in the river with Jenks draped over the end of it."

"What!" Johnny stared unbelievingly.

He went to the cliff bank and looked over, then unaccountably broke into laughter.

"No yuh didn't Peg-leg. Here's yore timber, stuck in the mud, right on the edge of the bank. Yuh done staked yoreself a claim."

Exuberantly he came over and thumped Peg-leg on the shoulder.

"I'll climb down and bring that there gold back to yuh, Peg-leg. I'll have enough *dinero* to take care of Nancy, and you—Peg-leg, I reckon yuh staked a claim for life to this here forty acres."

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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 10)

ment of not having that really rich dream mine materialize the first trip out.

There's nothing wrong with those reactions. You can still enjoy the West as a tourist, or find opportunity in some other line of endeavor. But you are not destined to be a prospector.

The Love of Far Places

Though it is largely the hope of some day making a bonanza strike rather than the bean money daily returns that keeps the average pick and shovel prospector in the hills, there is more to it than that. The prospector has a genuine love for the far places. In him pounds the restless blood of the true pioneer and a hankering for the kind of self-reliance that only an outdoor life can give.

Whatever he gives as his reason for prospecting, he likes it. That's why he stays in it. And generally speaking, even without the bonanza discovery, he gets along.

I know quite a few prospectors for instance who have made pretty fair, and certainly colorful and interesting livings out of individually working their own relatively modest mining properties. Some are gold properties. Others are mines of various important industrial metals—copper, lead, tungsten and so forth.

One prospector I know has a turquoise mine high in a solid rock cliff near the crest of a towering mountain range in Arizona. You have to climb a series of ladders lodged against the sheer wall of the cliff to reach the mine portal. But he doesn't mind the climb. The mine is his, and the turquoise he has mined from it has brought him a better living than most men get who work for wages.

Few tributes have ever been paid the prospector. Yet the prospector has always been the first foundation of the West's great mineral industry. He finds the deposits, though others may develop them.

Perhaps the indefatigable ore hunter may best be summed up in the following extract from a speech made many years ago at a mining meeting by Nevada's Supreme Court Judge—J. A. Sanders.

". . . His path is the vanguard of progress, and his lonely trail is the great broad way to our nation's wealth.

"From him has come the West. Yet no page in history is dedicated to him. . . . No high-pointed shaft marks his last resting place, but his epitaph is written by Nature's jeweled pen in the industries of our common Country."

Judge Sanders was speaking of the oldtime

[Turn page]

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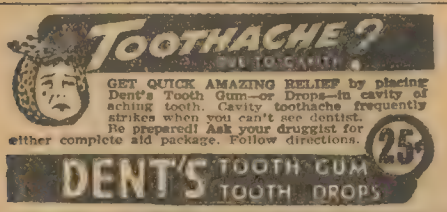
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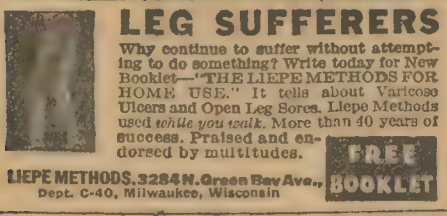
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See you all again next issue, friends.

—*Captain Ranger*

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

THOSE men are back again. We mean those two redoubtable, if somewhat eccentric, operatives of the Cattlemen's Protective Association, Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith. And this time they find themselves pitted against a thing to make even the bravest waddy quake in his boots—a ghost, no less.

This ghost, it seems, is making life untenable on a ranch known as the Tumbling K. So the boys, unmindful of the nature of their assignment, are dispatched to the wee town of Castiac, eight miles from the Tumbling K, where they meet up with one Welden, a storekeeper, who brings them to date on their nourishment with some sardines and a big can of peaches.

"Is there anythin' wrong with the Tumblin' K, Mr. Welden?" asked Speedy.

"Nope, not a thing—it's jist ha'nted, that's all."

Tombstone dropped the open can of peaches on the counter and the juice splashed everybody. Speedy grabbed the can and took a drink, too. Tombstone put both hands on the counter and looked at Welden.

"Yuh might explain that there re-mark, pardner," he said.

"Well, he asked me—and I told him. It ain't no secret. Dang it, yuh got everythin' sticky with that juice! Wait'll I git a rag."

"Speedy," whispered Tombstone, "did yuh hear what he said?"

Speedy wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Yeah, he said it was ha'nted. Have some juice?"

"I've done been juiced," said Tombstone. "That re-mark ruined m' appetite."

"How come she's ha'nted?" asked Speedy. "Any special ha'nt?"

"They say it's the spirit of Old Pete Cameron," said Welden, mopping up the peach juice with a rag. "Somebody murdered Old Pete with a axe. Never did know who it was. Some said it was Matt Hope. Matt was a bad boy. Shot a gambler in Kingsville and went up f'r life. Lived with Old Pete Cameron for a while."

"How come this ghost ain't run Jim Kirk, the present owner, off the place?" asked Tombstone.

"Jim's stubborn as a blue-nosed mule."

"I'm strong-willed m'self," said Tombstone, digging into a can of sardines and putting most of the contents on one cracker.

"But when a ghost starts monkeyin' with me —pardner, I'm the fastest movin' animal, two feet or four, that ever lived. A ghost chased me sixty miles in four hours one night. Didn't catch me either, until I sat down to rest."

"What'd he do when he caught yuh?" asked the merchant.

"Do? He was so danged exhausted that he jist layed down and said, 'Mister, if you don't turn off here, I'll ha'nt yuh the rest of yore life.' I said to him, 'What do yuh mean, turn off?' and he said, 'I cain't turn either way. I'm a straight-line ghost'."

"I never heard of no straight-line ghosts," said the merchant.

"Well, if one ever chases yuh, start zig-zaggin'," Tombstone said. "Mebbe you'll be surprised."

The storekeeper looked doubtful. The boys paid for their lunch then and opined as how, since they had sold their horses before hopping the rattler for Castiac and would have to walk out to the Tumbling K, they had better be heading out.

Tombstone dug deeply into his war-sack and drew out his belt and holstered gun. Speedy spat dryly and dug out his belt and gun also.

"'Course, yuh know, Tombstone, a bullet don't faze a ghost," he said. "I'll betcha the ghost knows that, too."

"They do, huh?" muttered Tombstone. "Well, I'll take a chance. Yuh know, we might jist run into a awful ignorant ghost which wouldn't know."

And so begins the hilarious and eerie tale of GHOST OF THE TUMBLING K, by W. C. Tuttle, which will pace the pack of swell stories to be found in the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN. How Tombstone Jones, seven feet tall and thin as a willer wand, and Speedy Smith, five-feet-seven and thin as a smaller willer wand, manage to cope with this Tumbling K ghost, one who can be heard but not seen, makes some of the most entertaining reading you'll run across in many a moon!

Co-featured with GHOST OF THE TUMBLING K in the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN will be a dramatic-action novelet by Nels Leroy Jorgensen entitled LONG-RIDER GUN-LAW.

In this red-blooded tale of the old West, "Tennessee" Vard returns to Broken Buttes from south of the border to learn that the town, as well as his own father, Sheriff Joe Vard, regard him with the utmost suspicion because of his close association with "Long-loop" Lassiter, a notorious longrider.

When a stagecoach is held up, robbed, and a couple of men killed, the name of Tennessee Vard is immediately linked with the

[*Turn page*]

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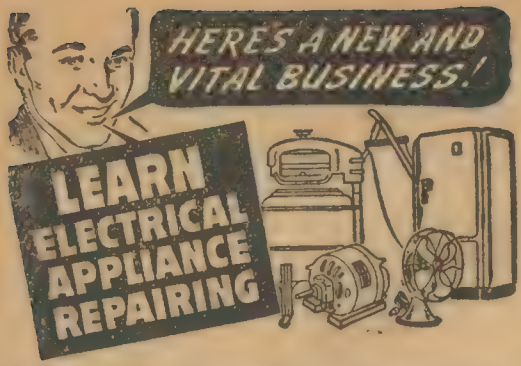

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crime. Then when an old miner Jed Lucas receives a dose of lead and Tennessee is found in the vicinity shortly after the sound of the shots fade away, suspicion runs even more rabid against him and a posse brings him in.

Harmon Storms, a representative for the express company, whose stage had been robbed, insists that Tennessee be held in jail. They had not taken Tennessee's gun as yet—probably hoping he would make a break so that they could shoot him, he thought—and he listened with a rising anger to Storms' demand that he be jailed on suspicion.

What happens then is best told by the following short excerpt from the story itself:

Old Sheriff Joe Vard looked worried and harried. The last hours had added years to his gaunt, spare frame. He stared at his son, the while his gnarled fingers went on packing curly black tobacco into the charred bowl of his pipe. "Mr. Storms is right, Tennessee," he said finally. "We got to—"

"The devil you do!" Tennessee broke in, his voice cracking like a blacksnake whip. And with this ejaculation, he threw himself back and cleared his gun.

Crouched against the board wall, head bent forward, amber light danced and played in his gray eyes. It lay in back of the lean gray menace of his gun, and the gun made stabbing gestures as he went on.

"I was left a shootin' iron in the hope that I'd try to make a break before we got here—and then get salivated doin' it!" he snarled from between tight lips. "Well, here it is, that break. Storms, why don't you move? Or that gunnie of yours, Whitely? Where's those anxious guns now?"

They backed away from him. No hand went near a holster. There was killer light in Tennessee Vard's eyes, naked and aflame. Tick Warden, the deputy who had helped bring him in with Harmon Storms, never stirred. The sheriff kept his hands on his desk, his old eyes steady.

Purple crowded Storms' face. His face bulged with indignation. His segundo, Whitely, was in a half-crouch, but he kept his hands far away from the two guns that ornamented him. The rest made no move, only watched, as Tennessee backed to the door, felt behind him for the latch, and kicked the portal open with his spurred heel.

Then—the storm breaks! You'll not want to miss the outcome of LONGRIDER GUN-LAW, with Tennessee Vard fighting back against a deck plumb stacked against him. Take it from us, Pards, you're in for some good reading in that next issue!

And if you demand further proof, a third fine novelet, WEST OF WINDIGO, by Norrell Gregory, should nicely supply same. The story of a young railroad detective who runs afoul of Indians and crooked contractors in the construction of a new rail line in the tough and rugged West, this yarn paints an unusual and colorful picture of one of the lesser known vocations of pioneer days.

There will be the usual collection of carefully selected short stories, of course, as well as regular departments in the next big issue of EXCITING WESTERN. So be on hand, folks. It's an issue you will surely enjoy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FIRST out of the old mail sack we find a couple of Alamo Paige supporters. Some like him. Some don't. There seems to be

quite a controversy among you EXCITING WESTERN fans about Mr. Paige—"Alamo" to you, pardners—and if you haven't as yet joined the fun, drop us a line and cast your vote. We like to hear from everyone.

The following are excerpts from a few of your many swell letters:

I read your magazine as often as I can get it. From the letters in the back, I see that some folks don't like Alamo Paige. I think he's the best character you've got. The stories about him show the true heroism of the Pony Express and the great loyalty they had for their oath. I like Tombstone and Speedy, too.—*Jerry King, Los Angeles, California.*

Thank you, Jerry. We are happy to say—because we like Alamo, too—that your opinion is on the side of the far greater majority. For another example, take the letter below:

I like EXCITING WESTERN better than any other Western magazine. I hardly ever read Tombstone and Speedy, but think that Alamo Paige is the best in the West. I read where William Rodgers said he didn't like him and can only say to Mr. Rodgers, "You don't know what's good, sir!"—*Floyd Castle, Depauw, Indiana.*

See what we mean? But we still aren't in complete agreement, as Mr. Raines makes plain in his following epistle:

For my money, you've got a good Western magazine. But this Alamo Paige jerk is the worst. He's pure corn. Give us more of W. C. Tuttle's work, like his Tombstone and Speedy stories. There's an hombre who can write a story.—*"Tex" Raines, Dallas, Texas.*

Hang and Rattle, Tex. Tombstone and Speedy are coming up again in the next issue.

I like your Western magazine very much, as do my boys. Especially the Tombstone and Speedy stories. They may not be good looking, nor appear to have any brains, but let me tell you that there are a lot of people who could take some pointers from those two characters.—*C. R. Exhenry, Long Beach, California.*

I enjoyed reading GHOST RIDER, by Reeve Walker, a whole lot. Tombstone and Speedy are always good. You have a swell magazine. Keep on putting out the good stuff.—*Gerald Taylor, Vests, North Carolina.*

Thanks, Gerald. Them's mighty pretty words to the ears of us old armchair cowpokes. That's our aim—to please you. And when we do, we're right happy to hear about it.

Just a card to let you know how much we enjoy your magazine. We get many a good laugh out of Tombstone and Speedy. Good luck, and please keep on printing the Tombstone and Speedy yarns.—*E. C. Courtoy, Nokomis, Florida.*

Don't think you've got much to fear there, E. C. Tombstone and Speedy will be riding for us for a long long time, if we've got any say in the matter!

In my opinion, W. C. Tuttle rides herd on our two saddle pals (Tombstone and Speedy) in a very pleasing and entertaining manner. Shall be looking forward to their next adventure.—*Charles Rogers, Bar None Ranch, Las Vegas, Nevada.*

The Bar None, huh? That's not bad, Charles. Not bad a'tall.

And that, folks, winds up another visit—via the post office—with your editor. Thanks much, *amigos*, and to you who have not yet dropped us a postcard or letter, the address is: The Editor, EXCITING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. So long until next time. —THE EDITOR.

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